



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

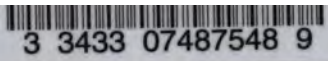
Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

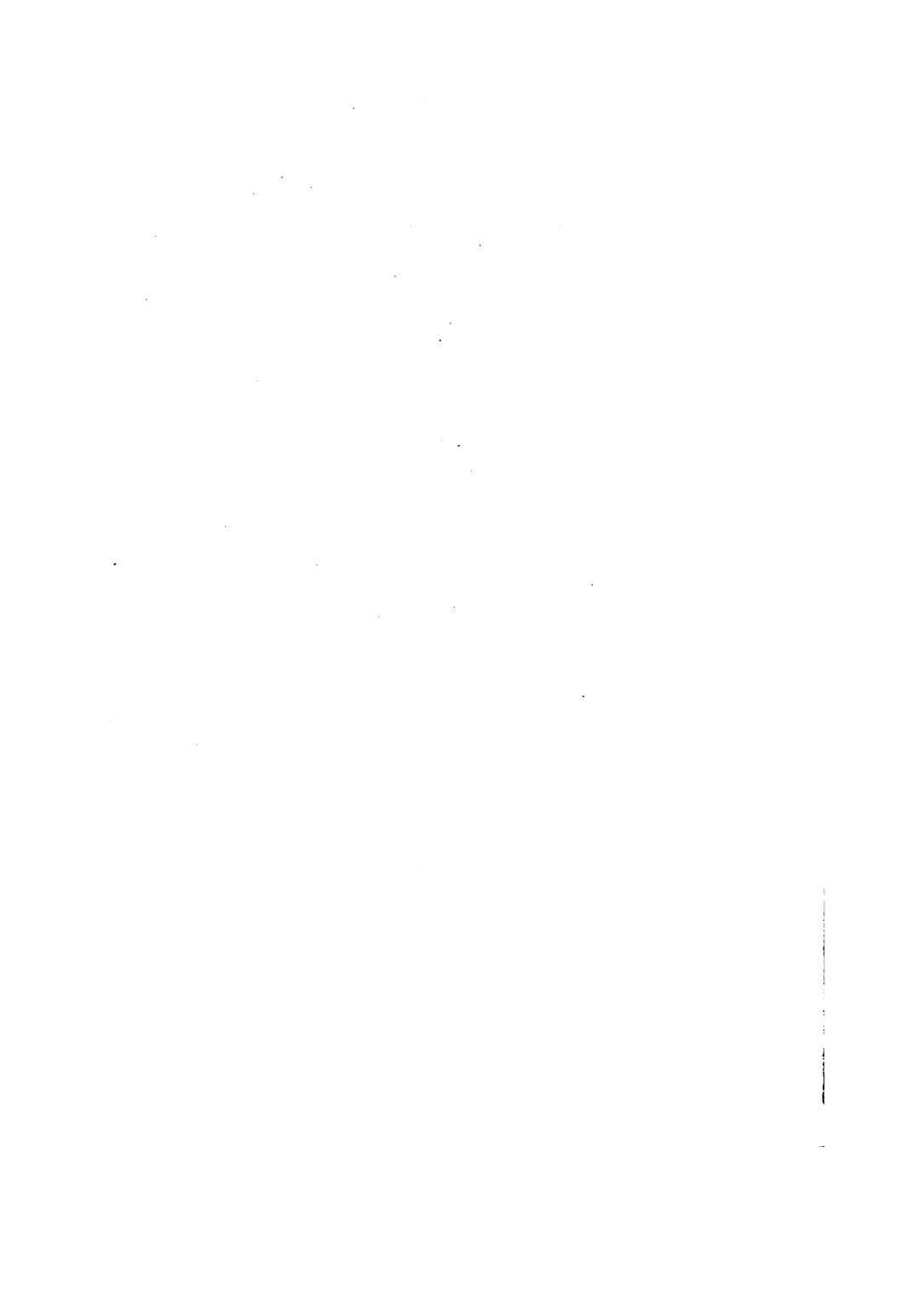


3 3433 07487548 9



1758

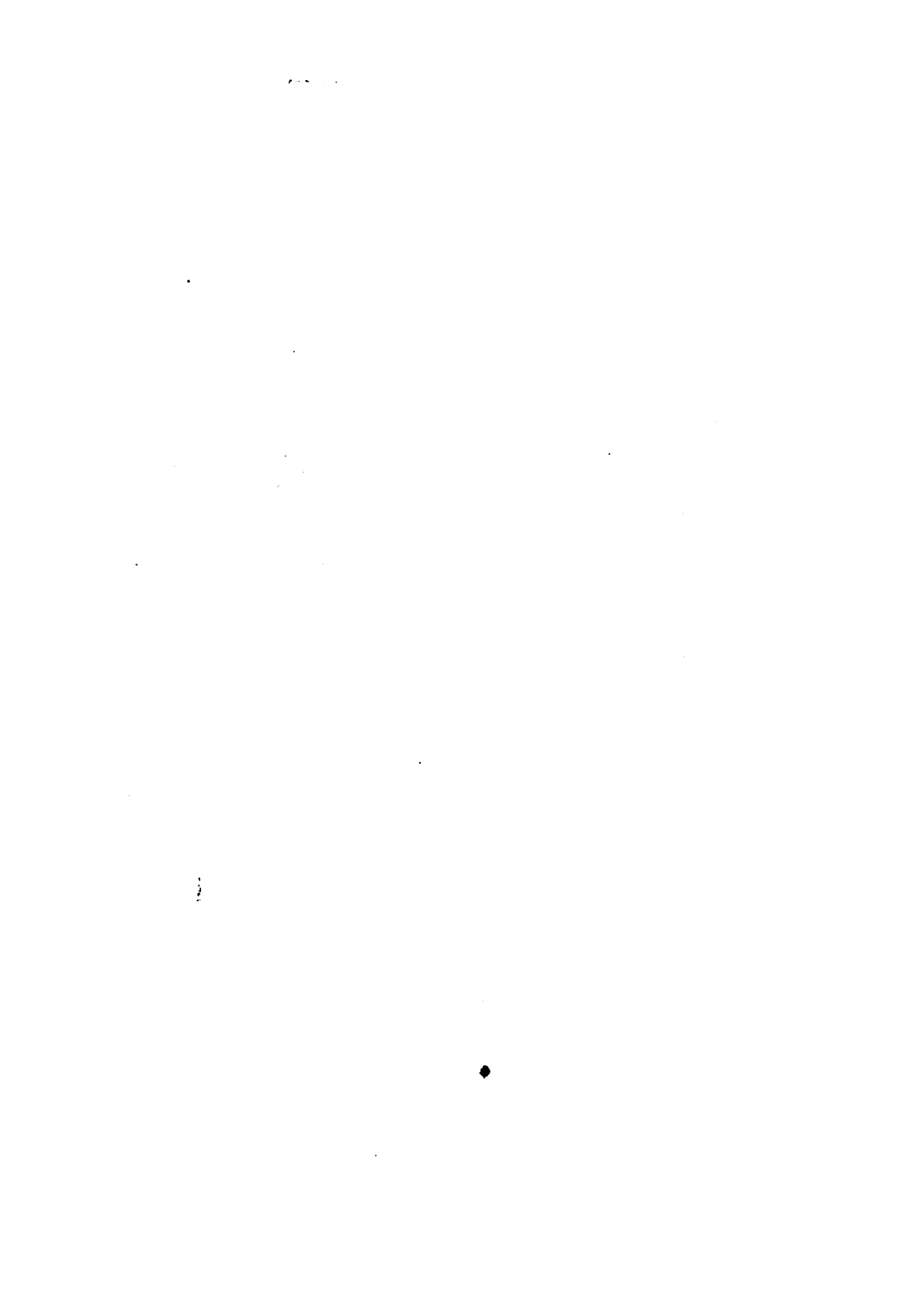
NCW
MSA Wey,



JOAN OF OVERBARROW

ANTHONY WHARTON

McW
McALLISTER



JOAN OF OVERBARROW

BY

ANTHONY WHARTON, pseud.

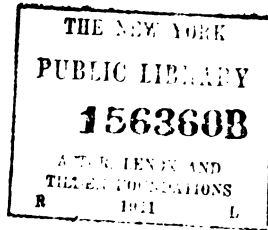
Author of

*"Irene Wycherley," "At the Barn," "The House in
Simon Street," "The Ledbetter Case," etc.*

Julia M. A. H. H. H. H.

NEW  YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

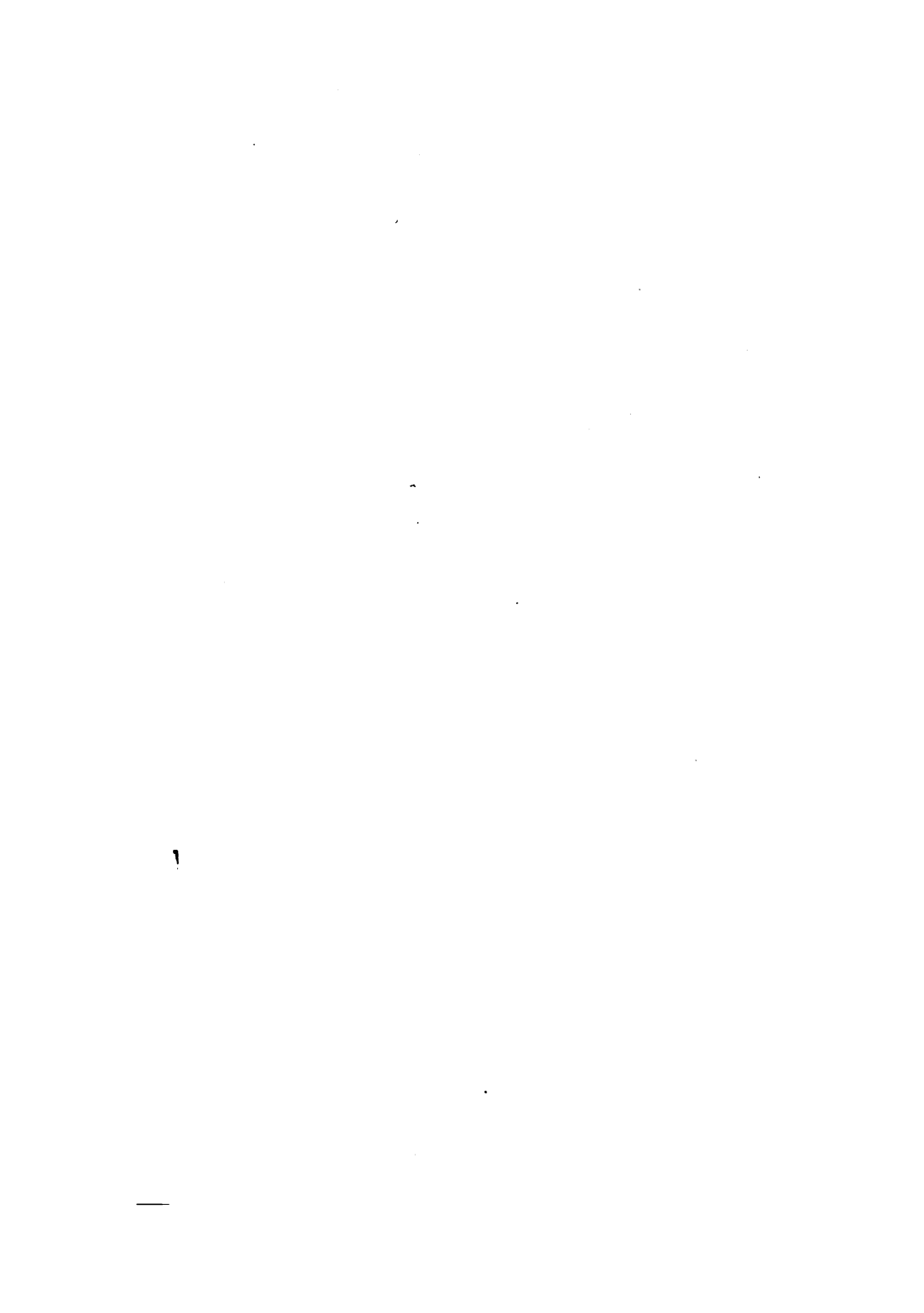
© 1921 ✓



Copyright, 1921,
By George H. Doran Company

Printed in the United States of America

JOAN OF OVERBARROW



JOAN OF OVERBARROW

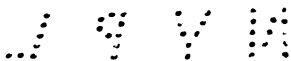
CHAPTER I

§ i

MRS. VELVIN laid the roller neatly against the edge of the pastry-board, straightened herself slowly, and, bringing up her plump, floury hands, dropped them on the broadly-projecting ledges of her hips. For some moments she surveyed the result of her labours solicitously, her head inclined a little to the left, so that a fold of pinkish flesh overflowed the starched collar of her crisp blue calico gown on that side. While her paste was of a satisfactory length and breadth and thickness and evenness, its oval, at the northeast corner—supposing Mrs. Velvin to stand, as she stood then, in fact, due west of the rolling-board—departed considerably from a strict symmetry. A trifling matter, easily adjusted. But Mrs. Velvin, as she considered it, sighed a small, vast sigh, that died in the quietness of the kitchen with an effect of having travelled through great lonely distances. Things were always so. Never, in an imperfect and contrary world, did anything “come” just right. Never, in twenty-five years of pastry-making, had she known the paste, when rolled to the requisite area and thickness, “come out” in the exact shape of the particular pie-dish for which it was designed. She continued to gaze at it in tranquil dejection.

When she sighed, as before and after she had sighed, Mrs. Velvin smiled an odd little smile, half-ironical, half-amused, wholly childish—a surface manifestation which had no connection whatever with her interior emotions. She had

smiled so upon her first appearance into that world whose imperfections were later to disappoint her so profoundly. And she had continued to smile so when the conviction of those imperfections as a wilful design of the Deity had settled itself for her upon foundations of disillusioned experience. As has been said, the smile was unconnected in any way with her emotions, which consisted chiefly of anticipations of domestic disaster, small or great, and solicitude in the devising and application of remedies for them. Life for Mrs. Velvin moved in a placidly meandering, mildly turbulent stream of what her husband referred to, in gently-protesting deprecation, as "worritin's". When she opened her eyes in the morning she began her day by worritin' as to whether Amy Lidgett was up and busy with her fires and dusters. And she closed them at night, finally, worritin' about possibly unbolted doors and windows. In eleven years of faithful service Amy had never once been known to rise later than twenty minutes past six. In the memory of living man it had not occurred to any person in that part of Wiltshire to enter any other person's dwelling-house at night with nefarious intent. But at these stated hours and in between them Mrs. Velvin's worritings recurred with unailing regularity. They constituted, indeed practically the entire emotional and intellectual activity of her existence. Her husband had long ago convinced himself that, so far from betokening any real anxiety or resentment or regret, they were the symptoms of a perfectly contented and untroubled happiness. In the one real calamity of their partnership, the death of their first child, she had displayed a silent, resigned fortitude of which he had known himself incapable. Ever since that dark hour his attitude towards these "ways" of hers had expressed itself by a smiling "Na, then! Worritin' again. There you go!" and a friendly pat on her rounded shoulders by way of transition to some subject of practical interest. To this treatment the worriter invariably yielded with docility.



At certain times and upon certain definite causes these superficial disturbances did indeed assume a formidable significance and gravity, and clothe themselves in the gloom of an enormous solemnity. The too-casual mention of God, Death, or anything that could be construed as referring even remotely to religious ceremonial, any allusion to her husband's brother's wife, Ruth Wardock, who had compromised herself with a sergeant of the Wiltshires, or any adverse criticism of or interference with her own cookery, the arrangement and decoration of her own parlour, or the supervision of her own daughter, Joan,—these were the most frequently recurring causes of immense, silent seriousnesses which hushed the house from attic to kitchen, and with which even her husband's cheerful optimism found it impossible to deal. In reference to God, in particular, her air at such moments conveyed to the onlooker the possession of a specially-communicated knowledge, the very assertion of which in mere words would have been an indelicate irreverence. But indeed all these subjects were dangerous in Mrs. Velvin's presence, and likely to lead one into indelicacy and irreverence. Afterwards Joan used to recall those periods during which her mother sat—conspicuously unoccupied and offended, on a particularly uncomfortable spindle-legged chair in a particularly remote and uninteresting corner of the parlour unused by any one else upon any occasion—looking at the carpet and twiddling her thumbs very slowly at intervals. Meals were at such times for Joan something of an ordeal, since neither her father nor her mother spoke, and the usually simple act of swallowing produced strange and disconcerting noises in untraceable parts of their persons and her own. Also, it was difficult to ask for a second helping of anything.

From these temporary withdrawals Mrs. Velvin usually emerged formally and in the presence of at least one witness, preferably her husband. Having shaken her head several times, slowly and impressively, she sighed deeply, said,

"Well . . ." with mysterious significance, paused, and then, having enumerated in detail a little list of things which had to be done, sighed again, and departed to the kitchen to do them. It was quite safe then, Joan knew, to hop a ball in the passage outside the kitchen door, or to lie on the floor of the parlour on one's stomach, with one of the big bound volumes of the "Illustrated London News."

Fortunately, these demonstrations, if formidable when they did occur, occurred only at widely-spaced intervals. And, curiously, even in their most depressed hours, Mrs. Velvin's half-ironical, half-expectant smile persisted incurably, not like a star beneath a cloud, but like a glow-worm in a vast night-wrapped landscape. Invincibly her eyes twinkled, her right eyebrow arched itself more steeply than the left, and her little sharply-cut upper-lip poised itself as if next moment it would part from its fellow and show the tiny regular teeth beneath. To Joan she had transmitted, with her short upper-lip and her beautiful teeth, this ever-flickering smile of hers. For Joan, however, it was an expression, a significance; in Mrs. Velvin's face it was apparently a meaningless accident. She had smiled when they had told her that Joan had been born to her instead of the son for whom, for her husband's contentment, she had prayed night and morning for many months. She had smiled when she had found behind the threshing-barn one morning the headless bodies of thirty-seven chickens. And she smiled now as she looked at her rolling-board and reflected that in a world where everything might so easily be right, most things were always wrong.

Her eyes left the board and travelled slowly, by way of the potted fuchsia on the window-ledge, up the white muslin curtain and over its spruce gathers, across the yard to the sturdy, broad-shouldered figure of her husband, whose back was at the moment presented to her in brilliant sunlight against the dark aperture of the cow-house door. Leaning with one hand on the pitchfork with which he had been

cleaning out the shed, with the other he raised his faded and battered felt hat and scratched a remote portion of his skull with a lingering and zestful little finger. Then he replaced the hat, applied both hands to the pitchfork and resumed with energy the loading of his steaming wheel-barrow. Presently he would come into the kitchen to tidy himself in preparation for the coming visitors, and sully its spotless flags with careless, pungent boots. Although for the nineteen years of her married life the odours of the farmyard had permeated every hour of her existence, Mrs. Velvin had never become quite resigned to them. The cow-house, in particular, aroused in her tidy, decorous soul an incurable dismay.

§ ii

When the wheelbarrow had been loaded to the verge of unwieldiness Martin Velvin trundled it with the leisurely briskness which marked all his movements out-of-doors across the yard to the dung-heap, where a tribe of White Leghorns scratched and pecked ecstatically. As he approached them, he whistled a phrase of three short notes and a long one, several times repeated, and at the familiar sound the birds paused to listen with heads cocked attentively sideways. One ran with outstretched wings a little way to meet him, and accompanied him affably to the dung-heap. When he had shot his load and had begun his return journey to the cow-house, it watched his retreat for a little while with quickly-jerking neck, before returning to its interrupted investigations. It was an unfailing layer, a bird of astounding trustfulness and self-possession, which Velvin had christened, in recognition of these engaging qualities, "Sassy". In winter, at half-past three precisely, in summer at five precisely, it entered the kitchen, cautiously, but with the visible consciousness of discharging a duty, and uttered a single, truculently melancholy squawk. At each afternoon appearance Mrs. Velvin said, with an amazement apparently perpetually renewed, "Well, Amy, . . . *will* you look at that

bird! . . .” And Amy, without consulting superfluous clocks or watches, straightway took from the shelf beside the fireplace a brightly-gleaming can, and went forth to feed the chickens, followed by the now triumphant Sassy. It was well known to Mrs. Velvin and to Amy Lidgett that Velvin prided himself not a little upon the hen’s special predilection for himself. Secretly, from time to time, both had made many unsuccessful attempts to induce it to perch upon their knees, as, without hesitation, it did on his. Joan, though the bird’s snowy whiteness pleased her, disliked all hens because the movement of their eyelids inspired her with a vague distrust. One morning, too, moved by a sudden access of wantonness, she had chased Sassy about the yard until, violently agitated, it had laid an egg without the customary shell and flown into a tree out of reach. The naked unseemliness of that recklessly-produced egg had appeared to Joan unforgivable. If her mother was not in the kitchen when Sassy entered it in the afternoon, Joan shooed the intruder with marked animosity back into the yard.

“Na then, na then!” Velvin would growl, appearing around a corner, or at the door of a shed. “What you doin’, Joan?”

And Joan, hands clasped behind her back and her long, slim, black-stockinged legs pressed as tightly together as she could bring them, watching the hen with malignly vigilant eyes while the rest of her face smiled in bland innocence, would reply:

“Playing, Father.”

“Don’ let me catch you chasin’ them chickens, see, or I’ll play you. You go an’ fin’ somethin’ else to play at, see.”

Blandly and innocently Joan would continue to smile until the growl had disappeared again around the corner or into the shed. Before the scarlet ribbon which she always wore in her golden curls touched the lowest button of her father’s waist-coat she had discovered that so long as she smiled he and her mother and Amy were powerless for all offensive

purposes in her regard beyond mere conventional threats. Only when, foolishly, one sulked or "carried on with one's tantrums" was retribution at all likely to overtake even the gravest misdemeanours. As Sassy, with irritating obstinacy, invariably lingered in the neighbourhood of the kitchen door in the face of rebuff, it was sometimes possible to surprise her by a cascade jerked suddenly from a jug from behind the door. Even if threats were not carried out, their mere utterance seemed to call for a careful defiance that possessed also the sweetness of a revenge.

But at a quarter to four on that April afternoon Joan was mysteriously engaged upstairs with graver concerns than the harrying of Sassy. Amy Lidgett, too, was busy with the laying of the tea-table in the parlour. In the kitchen Mrs. Velvin was alone with her pastry and her thoughts and the tick-tock of the old yellow-faced clock that hung between the dresser and the inner door. She stood, motionless, before her rolling-board, hands on hips, staring out over the gathers of the curtain, lost in vague reverie. At the cow-house door, bathed in sunshine, her husband re-loaded the wheelbarrow with slow, strong, accurate movements of his pitchfork. Involuntarily, Mrs. Velvin's short upper-lip crinkled a little as, for some moments, her eyes followed the fork's operations. But her mind returned to the gigantic undertaking of the Spring Cleaning which was to begin at six o'clock next morning. All its intricate weariness, its minute difficulties, its thousand-and-one dislocations of the fixed order of the house, rose up before her dauntingly. This time, too, matters would be complicated by the fact that the spare bedroom, hitherto employed as an overflow receptacle for furniture temporarily removed from other places in process of being cleaned, would be occupied and so unavailable for that purpose. The visitor who was to occupy it was then on his way from Stretton, and likely to arrive at any moment, probably eager for tea an hour before the usual tea-hour of Overbarrow. His mother, the wife of the Vicar of Stretton

would probably come with him. If she did, tea at five o'clock would be an unevadable necessity, and the meat-pie, which should have been consumed at the customary six o'clock meal, would have to be eaten cold the next day. When one has gone to the trouble of making a pie to be eaten hot at six o'clock to-day, it is extremely inconsiderate of people to derange one's plans and compel one to eat it cold to-morrow. The alternative—to provide separate teas for the coming guests and the rest of the household—was too revolutionary a proposal for Mrs. Velvin's mind to entertain for a moment. She sighed another small, vast sigh, and, picking up a sharp-handled spoon, began to trim the edges of her paste.

Once, in the long-ago days when she had been Miss Pledgefold and post-mistress at Stretton, and Martin Velvin had come wooing her respectfully, a twenty-two-inch corset had encased without discomfort her desirable but for long by him unattainable waist. But in nineteen years the slim, trim Martha of those days had receded into a steadily-increasing corpulence, in which, finally she lay, embedded and fossil-like, to herself a regretted and fading memory, to her older friends a source of mild amusement. She was now, in her early forties, a stout, heavy woman whom the climbing of twenty-seven stairs to her bedroom reduced to a purple-checked breathlessness and entire incapacity for further movement until she had rested for several minutes in the high, chintz-covered chair at the foot of her bed. Never, if she could avoid doing so, did she ascend the stairs more than once during the day, and never under any circumstances did she sit on a low chair. A varicose vein in her left leg caused her at times secret uneasiness and increased her distaste for physical exertion. It was her belief that if a varicose vein burst, one bled, without expert surgical aid, to inevitable death. Often she had pictured to herself the bursting of that vein—perhaps on the Axminster carpet of the parlour—the vain attempts of her husband and of Amy Lidgett to stop

the flow of blood, the swift irremediable passing of her life through that sudden jagged hole in her flesh. For fifteen years she had meditated an excursion to Bath for the purpose of procuring an elastic stocking. But as, in addition to the fatigues and worries of the journey to Bath, this would have involved the confession to her husband of the vein's existence, unknown medical expenses, and the exposure of the leg to alien eyes for the fitting of the stocking, the project remained still for Mrs. Velvin a lurking oppression and a cause for periodical worrying. The fastidious prudishness of the slim, admired young post-mistress of Stretton had never yielded to any appreciable degree before the blunt humanness of her farmer husband. In the beginning she had concealed the discovery of the varicose vein through bashfulness. Then it had grown difficult, and finally impossible, to admit the concealment of it. Sometimes, in the morning, when Velvin had left the bedroom, she withdrew her left leg from beneath the bed-clothes and examined the vein with prolonged intentness. Her anxiety with regard to it was, to a great measure, alleviated, however, by a chance remark of Amy Lidgett's one day to the effect that her grandfather, who had lived until long after ninety, had had varicose veins all over him all his life, and that Amy, personally, considered that varicose veins were lucky.

All her movements had a restricted, curving laxness, due partly to softened, unused muscles, partly to the tightness of her clothes. No inducement could prevail upon her to wear a garment which permitted the free use of her limbs. Even her hats were invariably too small for her; and the putting on of her boots on Sunday mornings—on all other days she wore list slippers—was for Joan's intent eyes the achievement of the visibly impossible. Mrs. Velvin's defence for the agonies of the process, which required Amy Lidgett's assistance, was always that she could not abide anything that "slopped" about her. And if her calves bulged

ludicrously over the tops of the boots, the boots were still undeniably "fours." To this last vestige of her original grace she clung with heroic doggedness.

Mrs. Velvin was "Wiltshire" by adoption only. As Miss Pledgefold she had come from Bristol, where her parents lived, to take up the duties of post-mistress at Stretton, whose post-office then formed portion of a shop kept by a distant relative of Velvin's. There for two years she presided rather haughtily behind a counter which divided her official dignity from the trickling commerce of the shop without interference with her discreet enjoyment of such interests as it offered to an observant young woman of superior education and refinement. On the day following her installation, Martin Velvin entered the shop to purchase from his relative five gallons of paraffin oil. He always maintained afterwards triumphantly that he left the shop determined that the new post-mistress should be his wife. But only at the expenditure of two years of assiduous and humble courtship was this romantic resolution crowned with its just reward. At the time of his marriage he was thirty-eight years of age, his wife's senior by fourteen years.

Closely as nineteen years of uninterrupted companionship had knitted them, and absolute as was his wife's confidence in his prudence, his justice, his integrity, and, above all, his affection for herself, she had never retreated from the original understanding, conceded with tacit cheerfulness by Velvin himself from the beginning, that in marrying him she had condescended socially. Her father had been "in the Civil Service." That is to say, he had been an Inland Revenue clerk, with a small salary and a large family, whose letters were occasionally addressed to "Arthur Pledgefold, Esq.," who always carried gloves and a walking-stick, and wore a clean collar when he departed each morning to "the office," and who was, therefore, practically a gentleman. Indeed, in the vestry of Stretton Church, on her wedding morning, she had described him, in her careful round-hand as a gentle-

man, without any qualification save the impressive adjective "deceased."

But Miss Pledgefold's haughtiness of demeanour in those days had been due not merely to the possession of a gentlemanly father. She had owned, in addition, an aristocratic and romantic great-grandmother.

§ iii

In the shabby little sitting-room of the shabby little house in a Bristol suburb, where the seven young Pledgefolds had been born in regular succession during a period of ten years, there had hung over the horse-hair sofa, as long as any of them could remember, a crayon portrait of a pretty, smiling young woman with very sloping shoulders, attired in a very *décolleté* gown of pale-green silk, to whom Mrs. Pledgefold had always referred as "Poor Grandma." The portrait was signed "Du Vallier," and dated 1782. And the pretty, smiling young woman whom it represented had once been a Miss Phœbe Langley, the second daughter of Sir Hercules Langley, Bart., of Langley Hall, near Wotton-under-Edge. Miss Phœbe Langley's history was a familiar and uncriticised legend in the Pledgefold household. She had made, it appeared, against the wishes and commands of Sir Hercules Langley, Bart., of Langley Hall, a runaway match with a wicked and designing Mr. Wallace of London, who, having treated her with great unkindness for a year or so, had then cruelly deserted her and her baby, and gone to America, never to return. Learning of her sad plight, Sir Hercules Langley, Bart., of Langley Hall, consented to forgive his disobedient daughter—but, alas! too late. The little lady with the sloping shoulders had died of sadness a very short time afterwards, and had been buried—circumstantial and affecting detail—on the second anniversary of her wedding-day.

From his wicked, designing father poor Phœbe's son had unfortunately inherited an entirely unsatisfactory character

and disposition. At an early period in his career he had come to loggerheads with his mother's family and had ultimately cut himself completely adrift from their distinguished and affluent company. He married the daughter of a small tradesman, and had by her a daughter who, in the eighteenthies, married Arthur Pledgefold, Esq. and subsequently became the mother of the seven children of whom Martha, the future Mrs. Velvin, had been the penultimate. Such were the history of "Poor Grandma" and its results.

No longer were there Langleys of Langley Hall, it is true, but Langley Hall itself the young Pledgefolds had seen on the occasion of a memorable Bank Holiday excursion to Wotton—a majestic building, winged and turreted, embowered in a park where there were deer in droves and a lake and woods and glades and a sense of splendid seclusion and serenity that had impressed the descendants of the unhappy Phœbe immensely. Mr. Pledgefold, who had consented reluctantly to the trespassing necessary to obtain a view of the house, had disturbed these impressions somewhat by his fears of ignominious ejection from the park. But the excursion had remained for his wife and children, and for his daughter Martha in especial, a proud and treasured memory.

Mr. Pledgefold had from time to time announced his intention of "looking up" the Langley family. Beyond ascertaining, however, that a Sir Robert Langley, Bart., then resided near Winchester, his spasmodic interest in the matter led to no further enlightenment. Upon her mother's death the crayon portrait had passed, by special testament, to Mrs. Velvin. The old tarnished frame had been replaced by a new one of the richest gilding, and the portrait itself "touched up" so that it looked as good as new. It hung above the fireplace in the parlour at Overbarrow, and was considered by Mrs. Velvin to bear a strong resemblance to Joan. Upon this point her husband had always been careful to refrain from expressing any definite opinion. But the date 1782

below the artist's signature afforded him a special satisfaction of his own.

"There's plenty as'd pay a couple o' hunderd poun's for an anteek like that," he would say, nodding his head towards it when he had gazed at it for several minutes through the smoke of his pipe. "Plenty. A'm glad we got that new frame for it, Mother."

"I wouldn't sell it not for twenty hundred pounds," Mrs. Velvin would reply with mild vehemence.

§ iv

As she bent with absorbed attention over the trimming of the paste, a sound, as slight as if a withered leaf had fallen upon the flags of the kitchen floor, attracted her attention. The tightness of her stiffly starched collar prevented her from turning her head sufficiently far to enable her to discover the explanation of the sound, and she returned to her pie with renewed absorption. Several minutes passed before a little stifled laugh behind her caused her to wheel bodily.

"I knew you were there, all the time, Joan," she said; and in the same breath demanded, "Who told you to put on those clothes?"

"No one," said Joan calmly. "I put them on myself, because Frank Hyde is coming."

"What difference does that make?" asked her mother severely. "What do you want to put your best on for because Frank Hyde is coming, I should like to know?"

Joan smiled conciliatingly.

"To look nice," she replied simply. She stood in her most characteristic attitude, her hands joined behind her back, her long legs pressed tightly together, swaying slightly and regarding her mother with the untroubled candour of her grey eyes. Her scarlet bow of every-day had been replaced by a pale-blue one to match her frock. Mrs. Velvin's intimate acquaintance with Joan's wardrobe informed her that the pale-blue bow had been manufactured by Joan her-

self that afternoon from a discarded scarf which she had presented to Amy Lidgett at Christmas.

"Turn round," she commanded, when she had considered this detail exhaustively. She stooped to administer a little adjusting tug and, discovering that Joan's best skirt concealed Joan's best petticoat, proceeded with expert abruptness to further investigations which revealed the audacious fact that Joan was entirely clad, on a week-day afternoon, in garments consecrated to the Sabbath morning.

"Well . . ." said Mrs. Velvin, "of all the young monkeys . . . For two pins I'd make you go and take off every stitch."

She contemplated the small but undismayed offender for some moments in affected grimness, then turned to her pastry once more.

"Go and sit in the parlour until Mrs. Hyde comes," she directed over her shoulder, "and tell Amy to come to me. The fire wants making-up. And don't you get fiddling about with the things on the tea-table, now."

"No, Mother," replied Joan angelically, and, because of her best clothes, walked out of the kitchen demurely instead of dancing out of it in pirouettes or hopping out of it on one leg as she would have done in any other garments.

Soberly she proceeded along the dark narrow passage, passing first, on her right hand, the big clock, then, on her left, the foot of the staircase, and then, on her right again, the door of Father's Room. Three more short steps brought her to the door of the parlour. As she turned the handle slowly a bob-tailed sheepdog appeared at the open front-door and, perceiving her, came towards her with fond writhings of his shaggy body and waggings of his brief tail. But Joan said, coldly, "Out, Billy," and, entering the parlour, left the dog to gaze for a little in melancholy surprise and then retreat dejectedly to the gravel path before the door. In that moment, though he did not guess this, Joan had realised that he was a dirty, smelly old dog, and unworthy of intimate

contact with one's best clothes. And he, on his side, had realised that her rebuff had held, for the first time in his experience, exactly the same note of impatient hostility with which the larger females of the house were accustomed to drive him from it. Still lost in melancholy surmise, he drifted round the corner towards the cow-shed, in search of that dependable male, his master.

CHAPTER II

§ i

THE parlour at Overbarrow was a long, low-ceilinged room, imperfectly lighted by two small windows facing westward and a larger one facing the north. On the hottest and brightest summer day a cool dimness reigned there, and its atmosphere was always tinged with a faint mustiness that resembled the smell of dried herbs. Bright chintz covers concealed the splendid plum-coloured velvet of the chairs, revealed only upon the most festive occasions. But, despite their bright gaiety and the spotless lace window-curtains, the room had by daylight a not unpleasant sombreness. A cottage piano, placed transversely across one corner near the fireplace, a large central table, a massive mahogany side-board, and an ottoman reduced by their bulk the space available for movement to four narrow paths indicated clearly upon the carpet. Every day every inch of that room was visited by Amy Lidgett's brushes and dusters, every smallest object on the what-nots, the side-board, the mantel-piece, and the two smaller tables polished with devotional care. Only when visitors of importance ate or drank at Overbarrow was the parlour used for meals. On other occasions these events occurred in the kitchen, Amy, as was in Mrs. Velvin's opinion becoming, sitting at a separate small table with the back of her chair just touching her mistress's. But this afternoon the big oval parlour table was laid elaborately for tea for five persons, with the white-and-gold "set" and the silver tea-pot, sugar-bowl, and cream-jug. On state occasions Mrs. Velvin always made tea at the table with water from a brass kettle kept at boiling-point before the parlour fire.

Near the fireplace Amy Lidgett stood nursing the sharp

red point of a bare elbow in one cupped hand and pinching her lower lip reflectively between the thumb and forefinger of the other while she surveyed her preparations, now completed.

She was a tall, spare woman with faded, dun-coloured hair, eyelashes that looked white against the apple-red of her skin, high cheek-bones, and a nose that curved concavely to an acute point, like the ram of a battle-ship in miniature. She appeared that afternoon exactly as she had appeared on the afternoon, eleven years before, when she had first entered Mrs. Velvin's service, an active woman of forty. According to her own statement, however, she was sixty-two.

Beyond the fact that her father had been for over fifty years under-shepherd on a farm at Winterbourne across the Plain, she possessed no history. She had never left Overbarrow save on some rare, urgent errand into Stretton. She never spoke of herself save in the briefest and most concrete terms, never asked for a holiday, never lost her temper, was never ill, never displayed joy or grief, hope or disappointment, liking or dislike of any kind. From a quarter past six in the morning until ten o'clock at night, day after day, week after week, month after month, she worked steadily and conscientiously for her employers for her board, her washing—which she did herself—and twelve pounds a year, apparently to her entire contentment. In Joan's estimation she stood high for the reason that, though she discouraged dubious enterprises, she never betrayed them, and was even willing, if there was not at the moment work "to be got on with," to aid in effacing awkward results. But nearly always Amy Lidgett had work that required to be got on with.

"Mother wants you, Amy," said Joan, encircling the teatable with attentive eyes.

Amy, without appearing to have heard the remark, recounted the cups on the tea-tray, assured herself that each saucer contained a tea-spoon, placed the bowl of wall-flowers more exactly in the centre of the table-cloth, put a log on the

fire, lowered a blind so that the light from the window should not interfere with the log's catching properly, picked up a pin from the hearthrug and secreted it carefully in the flap of her bodice, cast a last embracing glance about the room, and went out. All her movements, as she did these things, had the decisive economy of energy that enabled her to accomplish in one of her days more housework than any of her predecessors had been able, even under Mrs. Velvin's constant supervision, to perform in a week.

Joan stood rigid, listening to her retreating footsteps, until they reached the kitchen and ceased. Then she glided with birdlike suddenness and swiftness round the table until she stood within reach of a large plate of biscuits. Again she listened for a moment, then abstracted a macaroon from the plate and with the same birdlike swiftness and abruptness fled with her booty to the fireplace and proceeded to devour it at her ease. After each bite she surveyed the macaroon thoughtfully, observing its diminution with regret. When it was finished she tossed back her hair, and the action brought into her line of vision the crayon portrait of her great-great-grandmother over the mantel-piece.

Despite the touching-up of the Bristol photographer and the resplendent frame, the portrait, as a picture, had never possessed for Joan any particular interest. The intent gaze which she now directed towards it had no concern with its artistic merit or its romance. She had heard, a long way off, the jolt of a wheeled vehicle, which experience told her was moving along the Lower Road. As that road led from Stretton by White Horse Hill to Overbarrow, and no further, that jolt was almost certainly the signal of the arrival of the expected guests. She waited until a second jolt confirmed the first, and then flitted in rising excitement to the window that looked towards the north.

§ ii

Overbarrow lay in a shallow valley at the north-east corner of the Great Plain, a little gully to which the slopes of four great rollers of the plainland converged. The narrow elliptical depression thus formed was girded about by a wood of beeches, within the shelter of which the farm nestled snugly. From the village of Stretton, two and a half miles distant as the crow flew, it could be reached by either of two roads. The shorter, but more arduous, of these climbed a precipitous hill out of the village to reach the higher level of the Plain, the ramparts of which here rose steeply out of the lowlands. The longer, called at Overbarrow the Lower Road, made the comparatively easy ascent of White Horse Hill, where it passed through the fortifications of the old Danish Camp, and ultimately joined the Upper Road at the gates of Overbarrow. There both roads ended summarily, there being no other house for many miles in that direction. From the summit of White Horse Hill the Lower Road was merely a deeply-rutted track, meandering apparently without aim among the undulations of the ground. When Joan was nine years of age all that portion of the Plain, with the exception of the land immediately surrounding a few isolated farms, was as yet untilled and virgin, the undisturbed grazing-ground of roaming flocks of sheep. At that time one might have travelled by the Lower Road to Overbarrow a score of times and heard no sound along the way save the whirr of the partridge, the lark's twitterings, or the plover's scream; seen no living thing save these and the hares and the rabbits and, perhaps, in the distance, a shepherd moving slowly with his charges against the skyline.

A quarter of a mile from its destination the track made a last turning southwards round the shoulder of a slope, and, climbing a steep rise, half-way up which every loaded waggon that travelled that way in winter-time invariably stuck fast, descended upon the other side a gentle decline and passed

through a gateway into the enclosure formed by the belt of beeches. At the east end of the wood, some two hundred yards from the house, the Upper Road entered the enclosure by another gateway. Though both gates stood permanently open, their presence announced formally the division of the sheltered, tree-embowered homestead from the desolate wind-swept expanses surrounding it. They gave it, too, the effect of a miniature demesne, a place where nature had been subdued by a deliberate human artistry to a designed beauty; though, in fact, this appearance was entirely accidental, and had probably never suggested itself to any member of the five generations of Velvins who had successively occupied the farm.

The house, a substantial, two-storeyed brick building, with dormer windows in its moss-grown, red-tiled roof, stood at the western extremity of the clearing, its front facing directly the Lower Gate. Extensive outbuildings—the Velvins had always been prosperous folk—formed at the back of the house and at its east side an outer barrier enclosing the farmyard. Facing the house, at the other side of the road, on a patch of unenclosed waste ground, was a large thatched barn, the floor of which was supported by timber blocks so that the space between the under surface of the boards and the ground formed a dark underworld, fraught for Joan with a fascination of which fear was the largest component. Countless times, flat on her stomach, she had wriggled into that dank dimness, resolute to continue wriggling until she reached the far-off daylight at its further side. But after a very few minutes she had always emerged in inglorious haste, heels foremost, at the spot at which she had entered. She had an invincible dread of rats, mice, the more furtive insects, and all species of worms—all of which creatures, she believed, lurked in large numbers in that sinister-odoured hiding-place. There were strange fungi growing there, too, evil-looking, squelching, acrid things.

On the slope which rose behind the house two small cot-

tages were visible from the track, half-hidden amongst the trees. In these lived Samuel Watts and Henry Meade, Martin Velvin's two permanently-employed farm-hands, with their respective wives and children. As the farm was of considerable size, embracing something over five hundred acres, these regular assistants were supplemented as the necessity arose by casual labourers from Stretton. The shepherd, William Gates, who, save at lambing-time, slept in the loft over the stable, took his meals in the house of Henry Meade, who was his brother-in-law.

The five hundred acres which Velvin farmed lay to the south-east of the house, skirting the margin of the wood and stretching away in the direction of Imber. His nearest neighbour was the tenant of Pluckharrow, a farm two miles to the north-west. It would have been difficult, perhaps, to find in England a community more completely isolated, to all appearances, from the rest of the world. Once in a month a postman—in his official uniform an incongruous intruder in these pastoral surroundings—delivered for Mrs. Velvin a letter from one or other of her many sisters. Occasionally a farm-hand brought the newspaper of the preceding day from Stretton. But Overbarrow's strongest link with the Universe was its Sunday excursion to Stretton Church.

§ iii

This solemn function extended over four hours. At half-past nine, after the late Sunday breakfast, the party left the farm in the governess-cart which, for Mrs. Velvin's greater ease and comfort, had replaced the high gig in which she had driven from the church to Overbarrow on her wedding-day. Mrs. Velvin, by reason of her superior bulk and weight, sat facing her husband and Joan, silent during the slow journey save to recall some injunction to Amy forgotten. Velvin, smaller and a little awkward in his black Sunday suit and a bowler hat, occupied himself almost exclusively with Bob, the aged brown pony, which upon the slightest excuse

slackened its leisurely trot to a walk. The fragrance of the vaseline with which on Sunday mornings his hair was smoothly flattened to his head came to Joan's nostrils in spasmodic whiffs. The child sat primly, her hands in her lap, watching each well-known landmark appear from behind her mother's right shoulder. First came the plantation, then the dew-pond, then the shepherd's hut, where another track joined that on which they were travelling. After that the first glimpse of the blue distant Dorset hills and, between the pony's ears, the gap by which the road led through the Camp. At the top of White Horse Hill all the flat panorama of the Wiltshire lowlands came into view, with the red roofs of the village and the squat grey tower of the church hidden among the trees at the foot of the hill. Usually the church bells began to ring precisely as the governess-cart reached that point. And there, too, usually Mrs. Velvin wiped with a clean handkerchief, smelling of lavender, first her own nose and then Joan's, "to take off the shine."

The church, which dated from the fourteenth century, stood at some little distance from the village. The final approach to it, from the point at which Joan and her mother alighted, was made by a staircase of worn stone steps which descended one steep bank and ascended another—picturesquely, but for Mrs. Velvin fatiguingly. There were two hundred and nine of these steps, a fact which Joan had frequently verified. As they were too short to take one at a time continuously, and too long to take two at a time comfortably, the customary method of traversing them was by a series of staccato bobs, each followed by a brief but perceptible pause. This process Mrs. Velvin and her daughter performed so slowly that Velvin sometimes overtook them before they reached the church door, having in the meantime tethered the pony in the yard of a neighbouring farm.

As they were always amongst the first-comers, Joan, when she had remained for a little time in an attitude of devotion carefully modelled on her mother's, settled herself in her seat

comfortably to watch the arrival of the congregation. The same faces appeared Sunday after Sunday, the advent of a stranger turning every head to follow his progress to his seat. The little church was rarely more than half filled, the Rev. Nicholas Hyde, the new Vicar, having offended a large number of his parishioners by the introduction of a too ornate ritual. Some forty faithful adherents remained. Of these Joan knew accurately the names, the business, the physical peculiarities, and the more salient features of their personal attire. Any novel detail was carefully noted for discussion during the homeward drive when Joan, in virtue of her sex and her talent for minute observation, was temporarily admitted by her mother to a footing of conversational equality. Velvin, isolated during this exchange of feminine impressions, interjected at times masculine comments to which his wife and daughter listened abstractedly, resuming immediately with animation their own conversation at the point at which he had interrupted it. At no other time save during the Sunday homeward drive from church did Mrs. Velvin condescend to this almost confidential intimacy with her daughter. At the gates of Overbarrow she reinvested herself, almost tyrannously, with the aloofness of a mother, and Joan, casting off the intricate mentality of a middle-aged woman, relapsed unresistingly into the simplicities of childhood.

The congregation consisted almost entirely of tradespeople from Stretton and farmers from the district around it. The Pannett family, from Stretton House, who, with the old bachelor doctor and the Vicar's wife, formed the gentry of the assemblage, provided for Joan its strongest interest from a spectacular point of view. They brought with them into that remote little country church and to the dowdy, narrow-lived folk who worshipped in it, a breath from another more spacious and ornamental world. Sir Douglas Pannett, who had recently succeeded to the title upon the death of his father, seldom appeared in the Squire's pew. But his wife

and her two daughters, when they happened to be at Stretton, attended with exemplary regularity, in garments whose design and material and colour-schemes, although perhaps she never realised the fact, established immutably Joan's standards of beauty in feminine adornment.

For the younger Miss Pannett, who was darkly pretty and cold and proud-looking, Joan entertained at this period, for some little time, a passionate adoration. The child awaited her passage up the aisle with feverish impatience, and gazed at her imperious profile all through the service with fixed, ecstatic eyes. Lady Pannett and her daughters sometimes stopped in the porch, after the services, to distribute a few rather patronising civilities to the Vicar's wife, the only member of the congregation of whose existence they appeared to be aware. As Velvin and his wife invariably lingered near the church-door to chat with their many friends, Joan was sometimes enabled to edge timorously into the porch, and so place herself in blissful proximity to her divinity and within earshot of her clear, high-pitched, confident voice. One never-to-be-forgotten morning, Lady Pannett, becoming aware of the child's rapt interest, asked Mrs. Hyde who "that pretty child" was. While the Vicar's wife, with whom Joan had often interchanged smiles, supplied this information, Joan, the cynosure of four pairs of eyes, blushed painfully, wriggle violently, dropped her prayer-book, and, overcome by invincible shyness, fled to the concealment of her mother's ample person.

"Self-conscious little creature," said the younger Miss Pannett. "Now, Mother; we are keeping Mrs. Hyde."

Joan, happily unaware of this unfavourable criticism, watched the three gaily-dressed ladies walk gracefully across the churchyard to the gate and disappear down the steps. Her cheeks burned; a dimness swam between her eyes and the trunks of the old elms; she trembled from head to foot. The younger Miss Pannett had looked at her, knew who she

was, and where she lived. The world for Joan was filled with mysterious glory.

In this, the first of Joan's loves, there were, however, save in its weekly disappointment, no further incidents. For the Sundays of many months it endured, weakening slowly from inanition. Then, one hot July morning, Joan saw for the first time Frank Hyde walk debonairly up the nave behind his mother, swinging a straw hat with a brilliant ribbon carelessly, and turning his cheerful, sunburnt face from side to side as he went. As he passed Joan's seat his merry blue eyes met her twinkling grey ones. In that moment the younger Miss Pannett was dethroned, and never afterwards, though she made many efforts to do so, could Joan revive the faintest stir of emotional interest in her haughty aquilineity. Presently she married, disappeared from Stretton, and was forgotten.

§ iv

In the course of the following weeks Joan possessed herself of a considerable amount of information with regard to Frank Hyde. She learned, amongst other things, that he was thirteen, that he was at school at Bath, and that his summer holidays would extend over the months of July and August. On nine Sundays, then, he would probably appear in Stretton Church. He was, it seemed, despite his wiry appearance, a delicate boy, not clever, but very fond of drawing. His mother had described him to Mrs. Velvin's informants as "rather troublesome." This description of his character did not, however, seriously affect the favourable opinion which Joan had formed of it as the result of her own private observation.

On the third Sunday of July, instead of merely returning his stare as he passed up the aisle, she smiled shyly, and afterwards proceeded to more demonstrative invitation. Perceiving that her father had departed in search of the pony

and that her mother was absorbed in the narrative of the obstetrically-minded wife of the verger, she slipped into the church again and made for a little while a great show of searching for some mislaid article. Then, glancing towards the altar, she beheld, as she had anticipated, Frank Hyde's eyes fixed upon her in unmistakable curiosity and eagerness. He was waiting, she saw, for his mother, who knelt at the communion-rail. She divined that he desired greatly to speak to her, but was, for some unknown and irritating reason, afraid to do so. She moved slowly towards the door, glancing back at him as she went. Before she reached it he had grabbed up his hat, hurried down the aisle, and was at her side.

"I say," he said, with elaborate casualness, "you're Joan Velvin, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Joan demurely. "And your name is Frank Hyde."

The boy considered the situation from this advanced standpoint briefly.

"I say," he began again, "my mother knows your people, doesn't she?"

"I don't know. A little," replied Joan. "I must go now, because Mother will wonder where I am."

"Well, I say, look here. . . . You always sit in that seat, don't you?"

Joan nodded.

"Well, next Sunday, I shall come and sit beside you. Shall I?"

"Yes," said Joan, "if you like."

She smiled, held out to him a little hot, friendly hand, which he shook with politeness, and darted through the door. But her mother had not noticed her absence.

During the drive home she sat in a dream, a happy smile parting her lips. And that afternoon, and at intervals during the following days, she wrote several times in her deplorably erratic handwriting the name "Frank" on various

old envelopes abstracted for that purpose from the litter under the table in Father's Room.

On the following Sunday, in accordance with his promise, Frank deserted his mother half-way up the aisle and came boldly to seat himself next to Joan. During the service they nudged each other gently, and once or twice exchanged a whisper with elaborate stealth. Fortune as usual favoured the bold. Mrs. Hyde, discovering her truant squire's whereabouts, came across to Mrs. Velvin outside the church.

"Your little girl has made a conquest, I see, Mrs. Velvin," she said, laughingly. "I shall have to keep an eye on this susceptible young man of mine."

Mrs. Velvin laughed her short, breathless laugh.

"He looks as if he could take care of himself, Mrs. Hyde, I should say. I hope he keeps stronger now that you have him at home."

"Oh, yes, thank you."

Mrs. Hyde disappeared towards the vestry. The susceptible young man lingered.

"May I walk with you to where you get into your trap?" he demanded abruptly of Mrs. Velvin. She laughed good-humouredly, a little flattered by this request from the Vicar's son, a little amused by its motive.

"Yes," she said, nodding her head sagely as she considered him for a moment. "I should say you could just take care of yourself, young man."

Ponderously she set out upon the laborious passage of the two hundred and nine steps. The children, always a few yards behind her, stopped every now and then in grave conference, Joan in spotless white, with a pale-blue sash and a broad-brimmed straw hat, the boy a sombre foil in his Eton jacket and grey trousers. When Joan stood a step higher, their eyes were level. Oblivious of the passers-by, of everything in the world save the joy of self-revelation and mutual discovery, they followed spasmodically in the wake of Mrs. Velvin's slowly-heaving black back.

Joan's new admirer justified Mrs. Velvin's estimate of his ability to control his own destinies. Until the end of the holidays he escorted her each Sunday morning to the point where her father sat waiting in the governess-cart, filling the pipe which he would light as soon as the village was left behind, and, in accordance with his wife's wishes, not until then. He greeted the boy with an amicable grin to which, upon a further acquaintance, he appended a wink of vague significance. Occasionally he chaffed Joan clumsily in reference to her "sweetheart." But Mrs. Velvin, who disliked the word, discouraged these pleasantries, which, she said, "put ideas into the child's head." Neither, however, had the faintest conception of the ideas which all kinds of mysterious influences and instincts were, at every moment of Joan's day, busily implanting there. To both of them she was still an innocent, undesigning, uncomplicated little creature, with a few simple appetites, a few simple naughtinesses, and a hollow space somewhere in her interior in which, at the proper time, a respectable soul would be inserted, ready-made by the hand of God.

Before they had known one another a fortnight, Frank had found his way up to Overbarrow, had acquired with Joan's help an intimate acquaintance with the places and times at which meetings ran least risk of surprise, and had kissed her so often that for both of them the experience had lost most of the savour. By the end of August they had emerged from a hundred quarrels into a blunt but in the main tolerant comradeship. It was not until the Sunday following Frank's return to school that Joan realised his importance in her existence. Reflecting half-way through the service that the interminable period of nearly four months separated her from sight of him, she surprised her parents by a sudden furtive fit of sobbing. Other similar spasms of tearfulness occurred at intervals for a couple of weeks. But when she had revisited the little plantation which had been their favourite meeting-place and which now appeared haunted by

a desolation of unspeakable dreariness, and when she had made a calendar upon which to mark off the days to the twenty-second of December, as she had promised Frank to do, she grew weary of her woe, and quickly resumed her normal cheerful serenity.

§ v

One wet morning towards the end of October the postman delivered at Overbarrow a bulky letter addressed to "Miss Joan Velvin." It was the first letter which Joan had ever received, and she opened it with a sharp dinner-knife and exquisite care. Its bulkiness proved to be due to a paper-covered exercise-book folded neatly to fit the envelope and containing a number of drawings of Frank's schoolfellows made with obviously humorous intention. A brief note emblazoned with the College arms was pinned to the cover of the book.

October 25, 1900.

DEAR JOAN,

I hope you are very well. This day two months will be Xmas Day, so the holidays are not so far off now. There are a lot of new chaps this term. I send you some comic sketches of some of them. The fellows here say they are not bad. Did you make your calendar. I made mine. I suppose you heard my Uncle was wounded at Ladybrand. I will send you some more news in my next letter and some more sketches if you like.

Yours truly,

FRANK.

P.S. If you write to me put Frank on the envelope as there is another fellow called Hyde.

This communication was read by every member of the household in turn. It was agreed that the drawings were very funny and that it was very nice of the Vicar's son to have written to Joan. Mrs. Velvin decided that the correct and fitting thing was to despatch an answer without delay, and provided Joan with a clean sheet of note-paper, an en-

velope, a large bottle of ink and a pen with a new nib. At her suggestion the reply was first written out by her on the back of an old receipt and copied painfully by Joan on to the note-paper, which was ruled with faint pencil-lines, afterwards carefully rubbed out, to keep the new nib in the straight path. The whole operation occupied two and three-quarter hours, and produced the following result:—

DEAR FRANK,

It is very kind of you to have remembered me and written to me. I was very sorry to hear your Uncle was wounded and hope he will soon be recovered from his wound. All at Overbarrow are very well and liked your sketches very much. They are very comic and I am sure your masters are very pleased with your drawing. I mark off every day on my calendar too—(the spelling of this word had been verified by reference to a coloured advertisement that hung beside the kitchen window)—The weather here is very bad. I hope you keep strong and that we shall see you at Christmas. We see your father and mother every Sunday who look very well. This is all my news at present.

Yours truly,

JOAN VELVIN.

Mrs. Velvin stood by, watchfully helpful, while, with her nose close to the paper, and breathing hard, Joan traced her wobbling loops and strokes. Little did her mother dream through what adventures the lips that pursed themselves so babyishly over this sedate reply to Master Frank Hyde had passed in company of his.

But in the week before Christmas Joan retired to her bed with a feverish cold, and by Dr. Baxter's orders remained there. Frank, informed by Mrs. Velvin of her indisposition, as Joan learned, nevertheless made, to her bitter disappointment, no attempt to see her until New Year's Day had come and gone. Sometimes when she was alone in her narrow bedroom over the porch, she got out of bed, and running barefooted to the window stood staring towards the plantation,

the bare upper branches of which were visible over the shoulder of an intervening slope, swaying drearily against the grey December sky. Then, at the sound of footsteps on the stairs, she crept back, shivering and desolated, to bed. For hours at a time she lay wondering where Frank then was and what he was doing and whether he ever thought of her. The brusque, stupid little doctor was puzzled by an inexplicably high temperature and a resolute indifference to calves-foot jelly.

"We . . . er . . . we must be . . . er . . . on our guard against . . . er . . . possible gastric trouble," he said mysteriously, and brought next day a new medicine, which, however, produced as little result as the old one. Velvin, who was passionately fond of his daughter, became seriously alarmed, and summoned another doctor from Westbridge. As he had done this without warning Dr. Baxter, both practitioners declined to have anything further to do with the case.

Velvin, returning from Stretton in mingled anger and fright, to report this ultimatum, found, to his surprise and relief, his wife sewing tranquilly at the foot of Joan's bed. On it, swinging his legs nonchalantly, sat Frank Hyde; and in it sat the patient, already sufficiently recovered to absorb with appetite the arrowroot which she had persistently declined for a week. When at length she consented to allow her visitor to depart, she fell promptly into a sound sleep, and next morning demanded bacon for breakfast. When Frank arrived, by Mrs. Velvin's own invitation, later in the day, Velvin shook hands with him with such prolonged warmth that the boy formed the conclusion that he was a little drunk and for the first time in Joan's experience of him, betrayed a visible embarrassment. But before the end of the Christmas holidays he and the farmer had become fast friends and had collaborated in the slaughter of various hares, rabbits, and a brace of partridge, all of which Velvin insisted on his taking away with him, with his own compliments to the Vicar and

Mrs. Hyde. As Joan was still confined indoors, and as Frank limited his conversation almost entirely to her father when he came to the house, she displayed a marked lack of enthusiasm in reference to his sporting exploits. When he came to say good-bye on the day preceding his return to school she was practising scales, and, though she interrupted them during his stay, she remained permanently attached to the pianostool for that period. Frank went away disconcerted and a little sulky, and heard behind him as he walked down the garden path the scales resumed with callous energy.

§ vi

Up to this point Joan's education had proceeded, spasmodically and with frequent interruptions, beneath Mrs. Velvin's own supervision. She could read, but disliked reading. She could write simple words extremely badly. She could do easy sums in arithmetic, play three childish pianoforte pieces, and had attained sufficient acquaintance with the geography of the world she lived in to know that there were things called, inscrutably, "continents," and that England was situated in one of them named Europe.

But in addition to this somewhat limited supply of ornamental accomplishments she possessed a great deal of detailed and accurate information in reference to various practical matters of the highest importance. She was a skilful needlewoman, a reliable cook, and mistress of the quality and quantity and current price of every article in her mother's store-room. The routine of the farm, its methods, its ambitions, and its difficulties, were as familiar to her, and as much a part of her existence, as the creases in her father's waistcoat or the reek of his pipe. She had seen cows calve, ewes lamb, and mares foal. She knew the name and likely nesting-place of every bird she saw, the number and colour of its eggs, their shape, and how they lay in the nest. She knew why barley was preceded by roots and followed by clover. She could tell the age of a teg or a theave, why sometimes a sheep walked

round and round in a circle, and how much salt should go fitly to the making of a pound of butter. She could milk as rapidly as any man on the farm, she could split a dozen plucks, one after the other, each into eight equal sticks of kindling with ninety-six quick, neat snicks of a heavy-felling axe; and she could prune a fruit tree to her father's entire satisfaction. In his opinion her education had proceeded upon quite satisfactory lines, and was now practically completed. The daughter of a farmer, in his ideal scheme of the universe, became, if fortune favoured, the wife of a farmer. He admitted the necessity of being able to read and write and add up figures, but scoffed good-naturedly at Joan's performances upon the old yellow-keyed piano, which had not been tuned since its purchase, forty years before, by his father.

But he was to discover, just about this time, that his wife took a very different view of Joan's possibilities in life. One day in early spring Mrs. Velvin announced abruptly at dinner her intention of sending Joan to school.

Velvin swallowed a large mouthful of potato and mutton, and looked across at her dubiously.

"School?" he repeated. "What school? Stretton?"

"No," said Mrs. Velvin decisively. "Joan can't go there. I don't wish her to go to a National School. Besides, it is too far for her to go there and back every day. I won't have her mixing with those common, dirty children. I think she had better go to a boarding-school."

"Oh!" said Velvin. Long acquaintance with his wife's methods informed him at this stage that the project which she had introduced so casually was really a long-considered and minutely planned decision which no mere jocularly could hope to set aside. He drank deeply and noisily of his dinner-beer before committing himself to a definite hostility.

"Boardin'-school, eh?" he said, to gain time, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "Boarding-school you want to send her to, eh?"

Mrs. Velvin, in truncated, breathless sentences, proceeded. Joan, amazed, with a mind at once incredulous of the attainment of his suddenly-revealed horizon, and already busily comparing the advantages and disadvantages of a position which supposed it already attained, abandoned her plate, and, leaning her elbows on the table-cloth unrebuked, looked from one face to the other to follow the effect of her mother's phrases. Detached and incurious, Amy Lidgett replaced the soiled plates with fresh ones and laid the apple-dumpling before her mistress, who distributed four helpings without interrupting the thread of her discourse.

Her plan was, in fact, cut-and-dried. Joan was to go after Easter for an experimental term to a boarding-school kept by a Miss Mordaunt in Clifton. Mrs. Marish, a friend of one of her sisters, had supplied her through the sister with the most satisfactory particulars in regard to the school, its prospectus and a number of helpful suggestions with reference to Joan's outfit.

"Run upstairs to the bedroom and get it, Joan," commanded Mrs. Velvin. "It is on the dressing-table, in a long envelope."

But when Joan returned with the prospectus her father had finished his dumpling, risen, put on his hat, and was standing at the door leading to the yard.

"I don't want to see no prospeksis," he said glumly. "I know all about them prospeksises. Seventy or eighty pound a year and twenty pounds' worth o' clothes . . . to learn how to be too good for her own father an' mother. I don't want to see no prospeksises."

This was the first encounter of a prolonged and obstinate struggle. At some hour of every day Mrs. Velvin returned to the charge, producing the same familiar arguments upon each occasion as if they were absolutely novel and had not been curtly swept aside a score of times already. It was impossible for Joan to walk six miles every day to and from Stretton. Even if it were not impossible, it was most in-

advisable and undesirable that she should associate with the children of the foundry-hands, who attended the school at Stretton in large numbers. Mrs. Velvin knew for a fact that these children used the most shocking language and that, generally, they were "low." Joan was very backward. She must be educated properly. A boarding-school was, under the circumstances, a necessity. Miss Mordaunt's boarding-school in Clifton was the most suitable of boarding-schools. They could afford to pay the *pension*. Mrs. Velvin declared herself willing to go without a rag to her back rather than see her only daughter grow up an ignoramus. It would do Joan good to mix with other girls. It would sharpen her up and give her a chance of making something of herself. When Mrs. Velvin remembered what she herself had been at Joan's age . . . an expressive silence and a far-off look completed this comparison.

Most of these arguments Velvin traversed with flat disagreement. Those which touched his wife's personal emotion and souvenirs he carefully ignored, for tactical reasons. At first a certain acrimony coloured these discussions. But this was quickly replaced, on both sides, by an ostentatious doggedness. An irresistible force being thus applied to an immovable body, Joan's fate was still undecided when Easter arrived.

On Good Friday she saw Frank Hyde in church, pale and thin, and wearing blue glasses. He remained behind in the church after the service, so that these unusual phenomena remained unexplained until Easter Sunday, when his mother informed Mrs. Velvin that they were the sequel to an attack of measles. He was not to return to school, at any rate for some weeks, but was to live an out-of-door life in some bracing place.

As she confided these particulars to Mrs. Velvin, an idea suddenly formed itself in Mrs. Hyde's mind.

"I wonder," she said with a persuasive smile, "whether you could find room for him for a couple of weeks at Over-

barrow? It would be just the place for him. The air is so bracing up there on the Plain."

"That would be jolly," broke in the convalescent, grinning ingratiatingly at the hesitating Mrs. Velvin from behind the blue spectacles. "I should like that awfully."

"I expect Joan will be going to school to Clifton shortly," said Mrs. Velvin. "I'm afraid Frank would find it rather dull up at our place without a young person to play round with."

"When is she going to school?" demanded the boy, with his usual peremptory impatience of difficulties. "Anyhow," he added, after a moment of reflection, "she can't go next week, because it's holidays in every school next week."

His mother pinched his ear.

"Now, chatterbox," she said, smiling, "run along with Joan. I want to talk to Mrs. Velvin."

On Tuesday of Easter week it became known to Joan that Frank was to occupy the spare bedroom for two weeks from the following Monday. His paleness and thinness and the blank gaze of his blue glasses had affected her strongly. She spoke of him frequently as "poor Frank," and displayed extraordinary solicitude in regard to the preparations for his comfort. Mrs. Velvin, who—on the whole against her private wishes—had consented to Mrs. Hyde's proposal through politeness, became at last exasperated with her daughter's endless alterations of the position of the furniture in the spare room, and locked it up. More urgently and doggedly than ever did she strive to impress upon her husband the necessity of sending the child away to school.

So matters stood when the following Monday afternoon brought Frank and his mother, in a hired wagonette, to Overbarrow, where they arrived as the hall clock, with its menacing clangour, struck four.

CHAPTER III

§ i

AT the sound of wheels Mrs. Velvin went to the door leading to the yard to warn her husband of the visitors' arrival. When she had turned down and buttoned her sleeves and removed her apron, she passed a handkerchief over her face and contemplated the handkerchief with mild, mechanical interest. Then she proceeded without haste to the front door, where she found her daughter inviting the guests, with much urbanity, to come in. Velvin, from the yard gate, signalled to the driver of the trap to take it into the yard, but did not appear in the parlour until he had cleaned his boots and leggings and endued himself with a collar and his second-best coat. By that time, Mrs. Velvin had proposed and Mrs. Hyde had accepted five o'clock as the hour for tea, and Frank had been led away upstairs to be formally inducted into the spare bedroom.

When Mrs. Hyde had once more expressed her obligation for the Velvins' kindness and her hope that they would keep Frank in order and stand no nonsense, she enquired innocently whether it had yet been arranged when Joan was to go to Clifton. Velvin staggered to find that this outsider appeared to regard Joan's going as definitely decided upon, opened his mouth to reply, but, thinking better of it, shut it again grimly.

"I think the week after next," said Mrs. Velvin calmly. "It will take a week or so to get her things together. I shall have to take her into Trowbridge for a day's shopping."

"My husband thinks it an excellent idea," said Mrs. Hyde. "Most sensible. Your little girl is such a dear, bright little

thing that we both think it would be the greatest pity not to give her every possible advantage."

Mrs. Velvin seized the opportunity mercilessly. She glanced towards her husband with a smile partly ironical, but already victorious.

"He thinks otherwise," she said, with a little nod of her head in his direction. "He wants her to go to the National School."

"Who says I want her to go to the National School?" asked Velvin aggrievedly. "I don't want her to go to no school, not for the present, see. She has learnt enough to be able to learn herself anything more she wants to know. I don't hold with this over-educatin' an' puttin' high-an'-mighty ideas into girls' heads, see. I . . ."

"There he goes," smiled Mrs. Velvin, with long-suffering patience. "He wants the world to stand still. He thinks because he doesn't like things changing they won't change. He thinks . . ."

"Well, what I think I say," said Velvin testily. "And what I say I keep to. I've said that Joan is not going to school yet, see; an' she's not goin', an' that's all there is to it."

Mrs. Hyde smiled politely. She was a faded, anæmic-looking woman in whose pale face her large dark eyes, set very wide apart, were the only features which one noticed. In her younger days she had dreamed of a career as a pianist, but, realising the, for her, unbridgeable gulf that separates the brilliant amateur from even the fifth-rate professional, had abandoned her ambitions for the first eligible male whom chance had thrown in her way. She had contracted from her husband a habit of stereotyped phrase which led the more sophisticated to suspect her of insincerity, but which relieved her from the necessity of thinking about stupid people while she talked to them.

"I am sure you will not form any hasty decisions in so important and serious a matter, Mr. Velvin," she said soothingly.

ingly. "One must always consider the future of one's young people, must one not? My husband . . . who takes the greatest interest in your little girl . . . would, I am sure, like very much to have a little chat with you, if you happen to go into Stretton this week. Or perhaps next Sunday, after service. Or he would be only too delighted, I am sure, to come up here. He takes such a deep interest in anything connected with the development of children's minds . . . the seeds of the future, as he calls them." Mrs. Hyde smiled a little in apology for the ambition of the phrase, which, however, in view of its agricultural colouring, appeared to her likely to commend itself to the recalcitrant farmer.

"The Vicar'll be welcome whenever he comes, ma'am," he replied, rising from his chair. "But I'm the best judge of what's to be done with my own child. By-and-by, maybe, she can go, when she's a bit older . . . but . . ." He moved towards the door, plainly meditating retreat.

"Well, all I can say, Martin," gasped Mrs. Velvin, "is this. I've sent a letter to Miss Mordaunt that Joan will go to her this day week. And if I'm to have to write to her now, and say she isn't to go, and be made to look a fool that doesn't know her own mind . . ."

Velvin shrugged his broad, powerful shoulders.

"You can't blame that on me, can you? You shouldn't have wrote without tellin' me you were goin' to write."

Mrs. Hyde was an entirely well-intentioned woman. She perceived that this question of Joan's schooling was the nucleus of a serious domestic difficulty, and her duty as the Vicar's wife presented itself clearly to her. For every reason her sympathies lay with Mrs. Velvin, especially in view of the fact that her acceptance of Frank as a paying guest had solved easily a difficulty of some anxiety. To have taken the boy to any health resort of which she had been able to think would have involved an expense very serious to the somewhat straitened finances of the Vicarage. She saw that Velvin, if a stubborn man, was a very simple and very good-

hearted one, and she prided herself on her skill in sweetly reasonable persuasion of the lower classes.

"Now, Mr. Velvin, don't run away from us," she said playfully. "Whether your wife has written or not to Miss Mordaunt is quite immaterial, really, is it not? The great point is, do we or do we not want to do what we can to equip dear little Joan for her fight with the wicked, clever, hard world in which she has to live? Now, do come and sit down and let us talk the thing over sensibly."

Velvin hesitated, mistrustful, peasant-like, of graciousness. Finally he re-seated himself, and, as he did so, knew that he was a beaten man.

"That's right," said Mrs. Hyde, comfortably. "Now . . . let us look at it in this way . . ."

§ ii

Upstairs in the spare room, which immediately adjoined her own bedroom, Joan was busily unpacking and putting away in drawers the contents of Frank's small portmanteau. She had insisted on performing this labour unaided, and the boy stood by the small window, sometimes turning to watch her, but chiefly preoccupied by operations that were going forward on the roof of the big barn facing the house. Henry Meade, having reared a ladder against the farther side of the building, had climbed on to the roof with a bundle of straw and some hazel spars, and was now repairing the thatch of the ridge, across which he sat astride. As the angle at which the roof sloped was a steep one, and Henry Meade was an elderly and heavy man, his return journey down the incline of the thatch to the ladder appeared to Frank to hold promise of considerable interest. The ridge was on a level with the window at which he stood, so that a satisfactory view of the thatcher's descent could not be obtained from that place. But the repairs were proceeding with methodical leisureliness; the sparring of the ridge would probably not be completed for at least another hour. Meanwhile he maintained

at intervals through the open window a friendly conversation with the workman.

An exclamation from Joan caused him to turn towards her.

"Oh, Frank!" she had exclaimed in horrified reproof.

In her hand was a green cardboard box, whose cover announced that it contained twenty-five "Three Castles" cigarettes. This she had discovered concealed beneath the last layer of the portmanteau.

"Cigarettes!"

"Well, what about it?" he asked, with airy indifference. Joan stared at him.

"You smoke?" she said at last, as if she had said, "You are in the habit of committing murder?"

"Of course," he replied a little sharply. "Every chap at the school smokes. I've smoked hundreds of times."

"You only say that to show off," said Joan succinctly. "Your mother doesn't know you smoke."

"Yes, she does," asserted Frank boldly. "I bet you she does."

"I bet you she doesn't," said Joan.

"Bah! Don't be so goody-goody. You do lots of things your mother doesn't know you do."

"I do not," declared Joan, indignantly.

"I bet you you do," said Frank. And again she retorted, "I bet you I don't." Then, the overpowering temptations of macaroons occurring to her conscience, she added, a little weakly, "I wouldn't smoke for anything."

"Rot!" said the boy. He left the window, and, coming towards her, took the box from her hand and opened it. The cigarettes, in their slim, neatly-packed whiteness, appeared, after all, in no way sinister—even enticing.

"I'll teach you to smoke," said Frank. "It's jolly when you get used to it. Where is the best place to hide them?"

"On the top of the press," said Joan promptly. "If you get on a chair you can reach."

When he had carefully secreted the green box Frank returned to the window. To his intense disappointment Henry Meade had disappeared. The top of the ladder reared slowly away from the thatch, then moved round the angle of the barn until it came to rest immediately above the point of the end gable. A few moments later Henry Meade emerged from behind the barn and disappeared into the yard. Apparently the thatching of the roof-ridge was not to be completed that afternoon.

Frank seated himself on his bed and, taking off his blue spectacles, rubbed his eyes as if they wearied him. Joan noticed then that his eyelids were red and swollen and unpleasant to look at. She averted her own eyes quickly and became conscious of a sense of acute disillusionment. The spare room, which for the last week had become for her imagination a place of dramatic interest, became, abruptly, simply the spare room it always had been. The eagerly-expected occupant of it was, after all, just a pale-faced, sore-eyed boy. She did not define to herself with any precision this impression of disappointment, nor did it affect her very gravely. But when, presently, he fell, boylike, to mauling her and ruffling her best clothes, she escaped from him a little petulantly and could not be induced to further dalliance. The appearance of Amy Lidgett with a summons to the parlour alone averted an open quarrel.

§ iii

In the parlour Joan found her mother already making tea, its hour having been advanced to half-past four in view of the important decision which had just been arrived at, and which was almost at once communicated to her. She was to go to school on the following Monday. Immediately after tea her mother proposed to make an exhaustive overhaul of her wardrobe, and all deficiencies were to be made up by a visit to Trowbridge the next day. The spring-cleaning was *postponed*, apparently indefinitely.

Velvin was silent during the meal. No one paid any attention to him, and when he had swallowed two large cups of boiling tea gloomily he left the room, pleading "a bit of a job" as an excuse. Shortly afterwards Mrs. Hyde departed, with many final injunctions to her son to give as little trouble as possible. Through his blue glasses the boy watched from the garden the wagonette climb to the crest of the little hill beyond the beeches and drop abruptly out of sight on its further side. Already Joan had rushed upstairs, and, completely oblivious to his existence, was laying out the contents of her chest-of-drawers upon the bed in orderly array for her mother's inspection.

Frank stuck his hands as deeply as possible in his trousers pockets and, whistling manfully, strolled towards the end of the barn, against which the ladder still rested. As he went, Billy, appearing round the corner of the house, followed, sniffing at his heels.

When he had examined the ladder thoughtfully, the boy raised his eyes to Joan's window and discerned through the aperture her white frock flitting rapidly athwart the interior darkness. He called, and she came to the window, laden with an armful of stockings.

"Can't you come out?" he asked wistfully.

"No," she replied briefly. "I'm busy. Go for a walk with Billy."

She disappeared importantly. Frank wandered away slowly, kicking a discarded kettle-lid before him. The dog, divining the stranger's aimlessness, abandoned him and returned to the yard. In the kitchen Amy Lidgett had already begun, with circumspection, the washing of the white-and-gold tea-set. And Mrs. Hyde, yawning at times, jogged slowly homeward in the chill evening air, having by a few amiable phrases and for the gratification of an unconsidered impulse, completely altered the course of Joan's life.

When Frank returned, as darkness was falling, he saw that a lamp had been lighted in Joan's bedroom and that she was

sitting beside it, so absorbed in her sewing that she had not heard his footsteps. She did not reappear until ten o'clock, when she came downstairs for a moment to say good night to her father and to the guest.

A little before seven o'clock next morning the sound of voices beneath his window awakened him. The governess-cart was departing for Trowbridge. Joan, who was driving, waved a hand towards his tousled head, and Velvin, who stood watching the departure, shouted some morning pleasantry at which his wife and Joan laughed. The boy retreated from the window, resentful of this confederated amusement either at his appearance or his late rising. He decided to walk into Stretton after breakfast and just say that it was too dull at Overbarrow, and that he was not going back there. He would re-pack his portmanteau before he went. It could be sent for during the day.

Unless, of course, something turned up. . . .

While he consumed the substantial breakfast which Amy Lidgett brought to him, piping hot, in the parlour, he recalled suddenly the green box on the top of the press in his bedroom. There was no one to interfere with his smoking a cigarette, or perhaps two. Velvin was harrowing the ten-acre field, where presently he would sow pease for the sheep. Amy Lidgett did not count.

Presently Frank emerged from the house, blowing valiant clouds to left and right, and went to seat himself on the bottom rung of the ladder that still rested perpendicularly against the eaves of the old barn.

§ iv

Towards six o'clock that evening the returning governess-cart came in sight of the farm. The space between the seats was filled with a miscellaneous collection of brown-paper parcels of all sizes and shapes. On Mrs. Velvin's lap reposed some smaller packages and a handbox. All the rear portion of the vehicle was occupied by a new trunk of brown

American cloth and bright yellow wood-work, which was lashed to the backs of the seats, leaving the two passengers bare sitting room.

The shopping excursion had been for Joan seven hours of rapturous excitement, to which, during the slow homeward journey, had succeeded a reaction of sleepy fatigue. Of Frank she had scarcely thought during the day. But the physical separation of so many slowly-passing miles of road had revived an interest in him sufficiently strong to cause her to anticipate with pleasure the recountal to him of the day's adventures.

As the governess-cart passed through the Lower Gate Velvin came quickly from the yard to meet it.

"Well, we've got back at last," said Mrs. Velvin, as he approached. "I hope Amy has tea ready."

"Yes," said Velvin, "it's ready. But I've bad news for you, Mother. A tarr'ble thing has happened. Young Frank's killed hisself."

Joan had stopped the tired pony. For some moments the curt words refused to take significance in her tired brain. Then suddenly her weariness had vanished and she rose to her feet to face her father, who stood by the off-wheel.

"My God!" said Mrs. Velvin. "Killed himself?"

Velvin jerked his head towards the barn.

"The ladder fell with him," he said. "Fractured his skull, Doctor says."

"My God!" said Mrs. Velvin again. "What will his father and mother say!"

Her husband shook his head. "Better take the pony to the back door, Joan, with them things."

He walked beside the governess-cart to the door, unfastened the trunk and carried it into the kitchen. Joan and her mother got out and followed him, forgetful of their parcels, eager for further details.

Amy Lidgett stood before the fire, watching from beneath

her downcast white eyelashes a hissing, sputtering pan of bacon and eggs.

"This is terrible, Amy," gasped Mrs. Velvin, breathless from the exertion of alighting from the governess-cart. And Amy relaxed for a moment her vigilant superintendence of the browning eggs to reply. "Terrible'm," expressing, however, her estimation of the relative importance of grieving for the dead and preparing food for the living by instantly resuming the latter occupation.

As far as it could be divined—for no one had witnessed the accident—Velvin related its history. At eleven o'clock that morning Henry Meade had gone across to the barn with the intention of completing the thatching and sparring of the roof-ridge. To his surprise he had noticed, as he approached, that the end of the ladder was not visible above the gable-end of the building but lay beside it on the ground, the boy having somehow contrived to push or pull it over when descending from the roof. From the parlour window Amy Lidgett had seen him a short time before, sitting astride the ridge, smoking a cigarette, and had called him a warning to be careful, to which he had paid no attention. He had fallen still holding on to the ladder, which rested across his body when Henry Meade found him, quite dead, in the nettles at the foot of the wall.

Velvin himself, summoned from the fields, had hastened into Stretton to carry the evil tidings to the boy's parents. Mrs. Hyde had gone to Bristol for the day; the Vicar had fainted. For form's sake—for he knew that the victim of the accident was beyond all human assistance—the farmer had brought back Dr. Baxter to Overbarrow, where the Vicar arrived a little later, like a man in a nightmare, and with tears rolling down his face. Poor Frank had been carried away, stiff and cold, in the doctor's tran, supported in his father's arms. The shock of the event had given Henry Meade such a turn that he had refused to ascend the ladder that day.

As nearly seven hours had elapsed from the discovery of the catastrophe, it had lost for Velvin its first tragic intensity, and he narrated these particulars without any perceptible disturbance of his normal phlegmatic tranquillity of manner. It was clear that his mind was now almost entirely concerned with possible unfavourable comment which the accident might direct towards his wife and himself. If the boy had not been left alone the accident would not have occurred. They had been warned by his mother that he was troublesome and required to be kept out of mischief. And then, on the day after his coming, Mrs. Velvin had gone into Trowbridge, and left him to the surveillance of Amy Lidgett—who was busy in the kitchen or elsewhere, and could not have been expected to leave her work to watch over a mischievous boy. The person really responsible for what had happened, if any person was to be held responsible for it, was his wife.

Mrs. Velvin became aware of this under-current of her husband's thoughts long before any direct accusation of negligence rose to the surface. She was tired and hungry, and her feet ached abominably. It was shocking that the poor little fellow should have been killed so; more shocking still that he should have been killed so at the threshold of her own house. But . . . he was dead. More than anything else in the world did she desire to have her boots taken off. For the present, therefore, she declined battle by retiring upstairs to her bedroom to lie down. Thither Amy bore her, presently, strong tea, buttered toast, and a hard-boiled egg.

§ v

It was Joan's first glimpse of Death. For the first time one of the few human beings who formed her world had ceased to live. She strove to master that bald, incredible fact, to make it by its physical circumstances her own, actual and demonstrable.

Peeping into the spare room, she saw that Frank's port-

manteau had disappeared and that the open drawers in which she had arranged his clothes so carefully on the preceding evening were empty. She stared at the bed, with its white-and blue counterpane, where he had sat while he rubbed his inflamed eyes. He was to have slept in that bed that night—the counterpane was already folded down. Now he would not sleep in it—nor in any bed—ever again. For an instant her thought grasped this extraordinary fact, then it had slid away and was gone. It was impossible to think permanently of Frank in a state so negative that he would never again sleep in a bed.

Climbing on a chair, she found the green cardboard box still in its hiding-place. Two cigarettes had been taken from it. She closed the box again and left it there.

At the foot of the stairs, on her way to tea in the kitchen, she hesitated, then crept on tip-toe to the front door and down the garden path. Cautiously, for the dusk was falling and the barn appeared to her this evening vaguely threatening and suspect, she moved in a remote arc around it until she stood facing the end gable. The ladder still lay there, and, curiosity overcoming a certain repulsion with which it inspired her, she picked her way through the clumps of nettles to the spot where its narrower end rested. The nettles had been beaten down there by many feet; it was not possible to decide upon any one definite spot where Frank had lain. She perceived, however, at a little distance from the trampled patch, a cigarette-end. Her father's voice calling her from the front door drew her away from these lugubrious investigations, which had, however, contained a certain pleasure.

In the cosy warmth of the kitchen the brass studs and lock of the new trunk gleamed richly in the lamplight. With a throb of exultation Joan remembered that at that time on that day week her first real day at school would be nearly over.

CHAPTER IV

§ i

FOR the following six years the predominating influence in Joan's life was Miss Helena Mordaunt, B.A.

The avowed aim and object of the school over which this lady presided was to prepare the daughters of gentlefolk, between the ages of ten and seventeen, for a career of social usefulness. Upon this laudable end the curriculum of the school concentrated itself unswervingly and exclusively, cheerfully scornful of all intellectual pursuits that did not lead, with some encouraging directness, towards the ultimate acquisition and control of a husband and a household.

Thus the customary futilities of the *De Bello Gallico* and the *Æneid* were replaced by Swedish gymnastics; the study of mathematics was severely confined to such practical issues as were likely to present themselves in the household accounts of the upper middle class married; history began with the year 1837; geography, instead of obliging one to commit to memory lists of rivers, bays, gulfs, seas, and oceans, gave one a picturesque and realistic acquaintance with the principal fashionable resorts in England and abroad, the railway and steamer companies which transferred one thither, the hotels which received one on one's arrival, the amusements which diverted one, and the kind of garments which one wore there. As Miss Mordaunt made this subject particularly her own, and had travelled extensively and with observant eyes, the Geography Hour was one of the most popular of the school's day.

French and German were taught by resident native-speaking mistresses who were compelled to take part in the pupils' amusements and exercises, and forbidden, under any circum-

stances, to speak English. Dancing and cookery were obligatory. Visits to concerts and the theatre were, for the older girls, of weekly occurrence. There were four tennis-courts, a hockey field, and a swimming-bath. Every pupil whose parents could be induced to afford it had riding-lessons, and each morning a little cavalcade of correctly-attired young Amazons departed from the wrought-iron gates of the school, under the charge of a granite-faced groom, for the breezy spaces of the Downs.

But the most important and distinctive feature of Miss Mordaunt's educational methods was its Tone. This quality, to which special reference was made in the school prospectus, pervaded unescapably the atmosphere in which Joan existed, save at holiday-time, for six years. Considered broadly, it was a species of mental and moral complexion of uniform healthiness and comeliness which Miss Mordaunt's system undertook to superimpose upon the original eccentricities and blemishes of the eighty or ninety miscellaneous characters which formed her school. In each bedroom—Miss Mordaunt disliked the word "dormitory"—hung a printed card which set forth in Old English lettering the following exhortations:

THE SCHOOL EXPECTS OF YOU

1. Strict personal cleanliness.
2. Physical health and efficiency.
3. A pleasing personal appearance and demeanour.
4. Absolute truthfulness.
5. Strict fairness to others.
6. Habitual cheerfulness.
7. Grace and ease of manner.
8. Proficiency in games, gymnastics, and dancing.
9. Conversational confidence and facility.
10. Excellence in one particular subject of the school curriculum.

These were known to the school as the "Ten Commandments." And such was the force of Miss Mordaunt's per-

sonality, her unwearying enthusiasm in the pursuit of an educational ideal, and the example of her carefully-chosen subordinates, that it was her boast that in nine terms she could transform a shy, stupid, sickly, selfish little girl into a well-mannered, intelligent, robust young altruist. She was too astute a woman not to be aware that her system, which affected to rely implicitly upon personal honour, held for the cunning encouragement, for the development, of a particularly noxious hypocrisy, and to divine that upon the souls of many of her charges the school Tone formed but the thinnest of veneers. She consoled herself for these unavoidable defects by the reflection that for hundreds of her pupils her training had furnished a sane and satisfactory philosophy of life. The great thing, in Miss Mordaunt's estimation, for every woman, was to have a sane and satisfactory philosophy of life.

She was a tall, imposing-looking woman whose hair had turned, while she was still on the sunny side of fifty, to snowy-white. In her fresh-coloured, bold-featured face her bright blue eyes smiled with shrewd kindness. Anger, or, indeed, any noticeable display of emotion of any kind, was never permitted to disturb her dignified cynicism. Her most serious punishments were awarded with the same good-humoured inflexibility with which she directed attention to a missing button or an insufficiently-opened bedroom-window. Her father had been an Indian Judge; one of her brothers was a dandified and extremely good-looking Cavalry Major: the other, Warden of an Oxford College. Her sister was the wife of a literary County Court Judge. Her qualifications, therefore, for imparting Tone and social grace were unquestionable and unquestioned.

In consideration of this advantage, the wealthy Bristol business-people whose children formed the majority of her pupils paid cheerfully for the large number of "extras" which were not included in the comparatively modest figure of the school fees set forth in the prospectus. The school, in the years

during which Joan passed within its walls from childhood to womanhood, was an entirely successful and flourishing institution. The installation of the swimming-bath, shortly before her arrival, had marked the beginning of its golden age, and had dealt a mortal blow to the prestige of its more academic but less enterprising and progressive competitors.

In this new and stimulating soil Joan thrived with amazing vigour. At the end of the summer term Miss Mordaunt was able to report that she had made the most gratifying progress and had endeared herself alike to her mistresses and her fellow-pupils by her charming amiability, her unselfishness, her high principles and her cheerful submission to discipline. The Principal thought that she might, perhaps, with advantage, substitute for the piano, for which she showed no marked inclination, either riding or drawing—preferably riding.

To Mrs. Velvin's surprise her husband offered no opposition to this suggestion in the first flush of gratified pride with which Miss Mordaunt's report had filled him. He arranged with the friendly keeper of a livery-stable in West-bridge for a series of preliminary riding-lessons during the holidays. The child's fearlessness and grace, in a borrowed habit many sizes too large for her, extorted from the grinning stable-lads and miscellaneous loungers who formed the audience to these first essays in horsemanship tributes of blasphemous approval. Velvin, swelling with paternal pride, went in person with Joan to a well-known establishment in Bath, where she was equipped, condescendingly but unimpeachably, with the smartest of hats, stocks, habits and boots.

Upon her daughter's first appearance in these garments Mrs. Velvin, for unexplained reasons, wept. Shortly before her return to school Joan was photographed in them—in the saddle, full-length standing, and head and shoulders. Mrs. Velvin sent a copy of this last pose to each of her sis-

ters, and wrote across the back of each copy the words, "How like poor Mamma's Grandma."

§ ii

Afterwards, when Joan looked backwards to this period of her life and to that which had preceded it, a sharp line of cleavage seemed to her to divide the two. It was as if, between her eleventh and twelfth birthdays, her mind had awakened from a semi-consciousness, a species of torpor, in which until then she had existed passively and impersonally, without realisation of persons and things about her, except as appearances beheld a long way off, fundamental, immutable, subject to no influence which it lay within her power to apply to them. At some time during her first year at St. Angela's this state of childish dreaming ended—she could not recall how or why or more exactly when.

This transition resembled on a larger scale a particular physical sensation which, from her earliest recollection, had been associated with the act of passing from the dim twilight of the big barn into the exterior daylight. After that she saw, not merely the new things that crowded into her life, but even most of the old things that had once been so remote and so vaguely mysterious, in a clear, high light, definite and limited, so close to her, that mentally, she could walk all round them and realise their smallness. Not only could she see things and people thus, now, but something within her compelled her to endeavour to see them so—flat, hard, without mystery—somehow petty and a little mean. So acute was the division between her early childhood and all the rest of her life that in the retrospect, while she could without difficulty re-live every experience of her first day at Miss Mordaunt's school, she always saw the small Joan who had accompanied her mother to Trowbridge, only a week before, as a curious, almost inanimate little figure that had no connection with her later self, and that moved forever hazily in

an eternal governess-cart through an eternal dream-landscape, unchanging, unending, timeless.

When, at the end of her first term, she sprang eagerly from her carriage on to the platform of Westbridge station, and perceived her father and mother for the first time with this new vision, her impression of them almost dismayed her by its abrupt disillusionment.

They stood together between the book-stall and the head of the subway steps, a little stationary island dividing the current of outgoing passengers into two streams which converged again to the ticket-collector. Their faces were turned eagerly towards the third-class carriages, while Joan, in accordance with a strict provision of the school rules, had travelled first-class. Velvin, in his battered felt hat, his carelessly-knotted, bright-blue tie, his sagging drab coat, baggy-kneed trousers, and strong-nailed boots, presented himself suddenly to her eyes as an untidy and rather unclean elderly man who, despite his five hundred acres, might have been taken for a journeyman farm labourer. He stood on tip-toe, endeavouring to see over the heads of the passers-by, altering his position at each moment with excited eagerness to obtain a view of other portions of the train. Mrs. Velvin appeared enormously, almost grotesquely stout, in hot, tightly-fitting black cloth trimmed with orange. A small hat was perched ridiculously and insecurely above the purplish, perspiring expanse of her face. Her expression combined with resentment at the frequent assaults of passing elbows and portmanteaus the embarrassment of the countrywoman of superior class who finds herself, insignificant and disregarded, surrounded by the confident and bustling indifference of townspeople. Her black-gloved hands clasped tightly to her bosom a number of small and elusive parcels, the results of a morning's shopping in Westbridge. Of the two kinds of dowdiness which they exhibited, that of her father offended Joan the less by reason of its freedom from self-consciousness. Her mother's obvious and unsuccessful affectation of

gentility aroused in her small breast a pained regret that held a twinge of disdain.

Two cheerful girls with whom she had made friends during the journey from Bristol had come to the door of the carriage to say good-bye to her. The child, well aware that she had created a favourable impression upon these smartly-dressed and smartly-mannered young women, lingered until, with final, gracious smiles, they had retired to their seats. Deliberately she kept her back towards her unornamental parents, on thorns lest they should detect her and come to claim her. Then, assailed by sudden fears as to the safety of her precious trunk, she forgot these minor anxieties and hastened towards the book-stall.

"My trunk, Pater. My trunk," she cried, imperiously. "Come along."

Grasping his sleeve, she hurried him away to the luggage-van, leaving Mrs. Velvin to stand hugely alone on the now almost empty platform, still clasping her mutinous parcels, divided between hurt that Joan, after nearly three months of separation, had not even glanced at her, and pride that instead of the "Father" or "Dad" of common use her daughter had employed, naturally and as to the manner born, the esoteric and distinguished "Pater."

So much had St. Angela's School for the Daughters of Gentlefolk done for Joan in the space of ten short weeks.

§ iii

From that first vacation Joan established over her father and mother, by imperceptible degrees, a moral ascendancy which, as each succeeding holiday-time brought her back to Overbarrow with a steadily-increasing superiority and width of experience, grew more and more sweepingly audacious in its self-assertion. To its earlier innovations both parents offered in the beginning a faint-hearted, illogical resistance, on principle, and by appeal to an authority which already appeared even to themselves effete and without sanction. The

child's newly-acquired ideas were so obviously right and in advance of their own, and she herself was so obviously confident of their wisdom and justice, that mere formal opposition to them could not be for long maintained with any show of sincerity. At the end of each term Miss Mordaunt furnished a report no less laudatory than her first. Joan's rapid progress in gentility was accompanied, according to these typewritten documents, by an equally swift and commendable growth in academic knowledge and personal virtue. She was, Miss Mordaunt stated regularly, one of the most high-principled, popular, and in every way satisfactory of her charges. She did not add that Joan, in addition to being one of her most exemplary, was also one of her prettiest, pupils. Joan's physical comeliness required, indeed, no advertisement. It was, perhaps, largely the reason of her popularity in a school of eighty or ninety girls who were socially her superiors; it certainly accounted largely for Miss Mordaunt's personal affection for her; and still more largely did it operate to disarm domestic criticism and to establish Joan's smiling supremacy over her proud and admiring parents.

She grew up, without angularity on the one hand, without ungainly blockiness on the other, in a grace whose delicacy was as far removed from bodily weakness as it was from the ordinary clumsiness of the English schoolgirl in her early teens. The minor distresses of that ungainly period were spared her; the intricate machinery of womanhood that was beginning to stir within her gathered speed with smooth, unchecking precision; the envelope of tissues and muscles and nerves and blood-vessels within which it functioned mysteriously adapted itself tranquilly to enormous changes, miraculous adjustments, immense preparations. For Joan a headache was as rare as a pimple, a dull day as rare as a birthday. Kindly nature had given her a beautiful skin, beautiful teeth, beautiful hair—that waved without art and, with a fortnightly washing, never grew greasy—beautiful

little ears that lay flat to her small head, a beautiful little nose that never grew red, and two beautiful grey eyes about which the school raved. Though when Joan smiled the observer perceived none of these things. For the charm of Joan was a thing so elusive, yet so absorbing, so much a thing peculiar and native to herself, so little a thing of features and colouring and texture, that the most unimpressionable of her companions realised it as a gracefulness entirely of the spirit. To the parents and friends who came to visit or were visited—for Miss Mordaunt encouraged “visiting”—it appeared incredible that this fair, graceful, prettily-mannered child could be the offspring of a Wiltshire farmer. When presently Joan introduced to the school her maternal great-great-grandmother, the history of that celebrated relationship excited a profound sensation—a great-great-grandmother, of even the most uneventful sort, not having been vouchsafed, apparently, to the majority of Miss Mordaunt’s disciples.

§ iv

The first of Joan’s social reforms at Overbarrow was the introduction of the daily bath, a revolutionary proposal. Only at widely-spaced intervals and with portentous preliminaries had her mother been accustomed to perform this major ablution of her own person and, in former days, of her daughter’s. Never in Joan’s memory had her father condescended to this effeminate refinement. But on the first morning of her first vacation Joan announced that on every remaining morning of it she must have a bath, at least tepid, but far preferably hot.

The difficulties opposed to this suggestion by Mrs. Velvin were immense. The additional water would have to be drawn from the well in additional buckets and heated by additional fuel. Its heating would dislocate the preparations of breakfast and Amy Lidgett’s entire mornings. It would have to be carried upstairs for Joan’s use and carried downstairs

again when Joan had used it. Apart from the waste of water, fuel, labour, and time, and the wear-and-tear of stair-carpets and Amy Lidgett's patience, there was the invincible and undeniable fact that no person at Overbarrow had ever previously taken two baths within a shorter period than two weeks. To take baths more frequently implied the necessity of taking them more frequently—a personal and unpleasant implication, to be resented tacitly rather than openly, indeed, but to be resented. Mrs. Velvin refused flatly to hear of "such nonsense" and retired into one of her tremendous silent glooms. Next morning Joan rose before six o'clock, drew with her own hands the necessary water from the well, superintended its heating and aided Amy to carry it to her bedroom, where she splashed and whistled in her bath for nearly a quarter of an hour of audible defiance. Before her mother appeared the bath-water had been carried downstairs. The sole disarrangement of the kitchen's routine was the advancement of the breakfast-hour by ten minutes.

At breakfast Mrs. Velvin said that "this nonsense" could not go on, and that if Joan had learned nothing but disobedience at St. Angela's, the sooner she left it the better. Joan smiled and said, simply, that if she did not bathe she "felt filthy" all day.

"I s'pose," said her father, interfering with good-humoured rashness, "you'll say next as how I'm filthy an' your mother's filthy an' Amy here's filthy an' we're all filthy, eh?"

"Well," said Joan gently, "I don't think it's nice not to wash oneself properly. Miss Mordaunt is fearfully strict about the girls having a bath every morning. She says the human body requires it . . . because the pores make you perspire, even when you're doing nothing. It's just like breathing," the child added, kindly. "Miss Mordaunt says the human body requires constant vigilance."

"Mebbe her'n do," said the farmer laconically.

But Mrs. Velvin, to whom the words "human body" ap-

peared highly indelicate in the joint presence of her husband and Amy Lidgett, intervened magisterially.

"It's not a question of being filthy or not filthy," she said with dignity. "It's a question of habit. And it's a question of having conveniences. It has never been a habit in this house because there are no conveniences for it. It's all very well for Miss Mordaunt and people with cold and hot water on every landing and plenty of servants to carry it . . ."

"Amy doesn't mind helping me," said Joan quickly, detecting this wavering preparation for retreat. "Do you, Amy?" she enquired over her shoulder.

"I, miss? Not if missus don't order against it, I don't. It's nothing much to carry up a can of water."

Joan looked at her mother, summoning to a smile all her resources of seduction.

"It makes you feel so comfy, Mummy," she said gently, confidentially, encouragingly.

The stout, middle-aged woman looked at the small child of eleven, and realised that she beheld, not filial undutifulness, but the fanaticism of a creed. She sighed and took the tea-pot from beneath its faded cosy.

"More tea, child?" she asked. That battle was ended.

After some minor skirmishes in connection with the wearing of her gymnasium uniform in public, the co-operation of Amy Lidgett in a fortnightly hair-washing, the purchase of certain additions to her toilet equipage, and the abolition of flannel nightdresses—details of personal application only—Joan attacked and overthrew one of the most fundamental of Overbarrow's institutions, the use of the kitchen for meals.

The smaller room opposite to the parlour had hitherto been sacred, under the name of "Father's Room," to dust, flies, stale immigrant odours from the kitchen, Velvin's old clothes, files of old receipts, old newspapers, a few superannuated books of reference, and a collection of bottles, pots, jars and

tins containing various evil-smelling compounds, which had been accumulating there for half a century. Into this retreat Velvin had been in the habit of disappearing, perhaps once a month, for the composition of some particularly important letter at a small table littered with old correspondence, advertisement leaflets, tools, cartridges, disused hats, paint-pots, and other miscellaneous rubbish. To Joan it appeared absurd that this considerable usable space should remain idle and in a condition of malodorous filthiness for the sole purpose of these sporadic and quite unnecessary retirements of her father. Equally absurd and objectionable did it appear that the family should take its meals in the kitchen with the servant, while two rooms were at its disposal for proper and private meal-taking. She expressed, during her first Christmas holidays, the opinion that Father's Room should be turned into a dining-room.

In this view Mrs. Velvin supported her daughter wholeheartedly. She had long regarded Father's Room with disapproving eyes. Velvin, despite his strongest protests, returned one afternoon to find his sanctum transformed to spotless decency, and his flies and bottles and old coats and hats banished to one of the attics under the roof. Presently a carpet appeared, acquired second-hand at an auction in West-bridge, together with a dozen table-napkins, six table-cloths, and some knives, forks, and spoons of more refined design than the substantial weapons with which, hitherto, Overbarrow had attacked its food. Velvin demurred, but in the end made up to his wife the deficit in her household money entailed by these purchases.

No insinuation, raillery, or cajolery could, however, induce him to wash or in any other way prepare himself for the solemnity of eating and drinking save when visitors were expected at the farm. Mrs. Velvin, on the other hand, after a little while, re-assumed the forgotten habit of "tidying herself" before dinner and supper.

Gradually, and by the mere cumulative force of Joan's

persistence in using the title the parlour became the drawing-room. A greeny-yellow oleograph which adorned the wall-space above the piano was removed and replaced by a comparatively inoffensive supplement to a Christmas number of the "Lady's Pictorial," which, with a little trimming of its margins, fitted the frame, vertically suspended, as well as the oleograph had done when it had hung horizontally. True a small area of comparatively unfaded wall-paper now appeared at each side of the frame; but the corner where it hung was a darkish one, so that the visitor was unlikely to notice this discrepancy.

The windows of the drawing-room were now opened regularly. All over the house, indeed, windows that had remained hermetically sealed for generations were forced open, to emit alleged "stuffiness," until even the Spartan Amy Lidgett complained of draughts. But Joan's small soul blazed with the ardours of the convert. If her mother or Amy closed an aperture a dozen times, it was to find it reopened at their next passing. Only in the big bedroom, where all through the night Mrs. Velvin's pursed lips emitted a faint, hissing blowing, three puffs of which synchronised exactly with two of her husband's long-drawn, strangulated snores, did stuffiness reign inviolate and unreproached. For Joan herself, already, one of the most delicious sensations was the breath of moving air upon her face as she fell asleep; in a little while sleep without an open window became for her an impossibility.

In the summer of her second year at St. Angela's she proposed the painting and re-papering of her own bedroom and the spare room, on the grounds that it was not possible to invite any of her schoolfellows to Overbarrow while the rooms continued in their existing dinginess. While this proposal was still being debated, Joan herself received an invitation to spend a fortnight at the house of her especial intimate, Marjory Holthurst, near Bath. This happy coincidence decided her hesitating father. A small building con-

tractor at Stretton undertook to perform the necessary improvements tastefully and on moderate terms. On the eve of her departure for Bath Joan selected the wallpaper in the contractor's stifling little wooden office. It was the most expensive of his stock, and the most nearly resembling that which adorned the bedroom which she shared with Marjory Holthurst at St. Angela's.

CHAPTER V

§ i

AT the commencement of the term Joan had been promoted to the Third Form, and had begun a friendship which was to endure with a few thrilling and reanimating intervals of estrangement long after the ending of her career at St. Angela's.

At thirteen years of age—she was Joan's senior by eleven months—Marjory Holthurst was a sturdy, rather heavily-built, brusque-mannered tomboy, brown-haired, brown-eyed, and brown-skinned, without the least pretension to good looks and, save in a common enthusiasm and proficiency in games, and a corresponding personal popularity, the antipodes to Joan's essential femininity and anxious conventionality of outlook.

Her father, to whom she referred most usually as "The Gunner" or "The Old Gunner," had gained a D.S.O., and lost an arm, at Colenso, and had settled down to end his days peacefully in his native county. She had grown up with two elder brothers—for the moment at Harrow—in a world of boys, young and old. She spoke a clipped, curt slang, garnished with strange ornament, partly acquired from her father's subalterns and batmen, partly from her brothers, partly of her own invention. Her laugh, which was always preceded by a cool, searching stare, was a single, short, hoarse grunt. By comparison with the majority of her schoolfellows she had nerves of steel, flesh of leather, and muscles of whipcord. She transgressed all rules with cheerful defiance, "cheeked" the Matron affably, smoked furtively, stood always at the foot of her Form, refused to be taught to cook, and regretted openly the misfortune that had made of her a girl.

For the sake of her social connections and for other strategical reasons Miss Mordaunt suffered this thorn in her flesh gladly. St. Angela's Hockey Team was one of its chiefest prides, and the brightest ornament of the Hockey Team was undoubtedly the cool, resourceful Marjory. To her energetic, curiously virile personality, too, the Principal traced the strong *esprit de corps* which at this time pervaded the lower Forms of the school; and, finally, it was impossible to convince Marjory herself that even the most serious of her offences was of the slightest importance.

By her mother's express stipulation she occupied alone a small bedroom at the top of one of the two semi-detached houses which formed the school buildings. This much-discussed and much-envied privacy bulked largely in Joan's estimate of her new friend's values. She herself slept in a room with four companions, in a publicity only theoretically mitigated by cubicle curtains. It was with rapturous exultation, therefore, that shortly before Easter she accepted Marjory's hoped-for proposal that she should share the proud distinction of Number 19.

The strong influence which her most difficult pupil exerted over her most docile one, not always in the direction towards which the Ten Commandments pointed, had already attracted the attention of Miss Mordaunt's observant eyes. For a little time she hesitated as to the advisability of permitting the proposed room-partnership, although Marjory had already obtained her mother's consent to it. Then, judging Joan too timid and too conscientious to attempt to emulate even the most admired indecorum, she contented herself with the delivery of a discreet warning.

"Of course, Joan, Marjory is quite a nice girl. Otherwise, I should not agree to this arrangement for a moment. She is extremely well-connected . . . and she has had advantages . . . and opportunities which . . . well . . . which have been denied to you . . . and to many others of her companions. . . . She is, as I say, quite a nice girl . . .

and quite a good-hearted girl. But, in many ways, I regret to say, she is anything but a suitable model for you . . . or an example of the Tone which, I am happy to say, prevails in this school. Your own good sense will indicate to you many little points, in her particular case perhaps of no great seriousness, but which, adopted or imitated perhaps quite unconsciously by a girl less . . . securely situated . . . socially . . . would almost certainly be very greatly to her disadvantage in after-life."

Thus and further to the same effect Miss Mordaunt from her big roll-top desk, with kindly impressiveness. Joan listened meekly and earnestly, and having for some hours pondered deeply upon these confidential criticisms of her friend, communicated them to her *verbatim*.

"Ladylike be hanged!" interrupted the irreverent Marjory, at one disapproving phrase. "Who wants to be ladylike? I never heard of a lady until I came to this Cats' Home. It's bad enough to be a woman . . . but . . . lady. . . . S'elp me, I'd rather be a bloomin' female and have done with it."

If Joan's experience did not savour the full raciness of these remarks, her wit at least divined their general blunt purport. From that moment the words "lady" and "ladylike" disappeared from her vocabulary.

"As for St. Angela's and its Tone," continued the iconoclast through the mastication of a chocolate almond, "what is it? Don't do this, don't do that, do some other silly old thing. Why? Nobody knows. What does it matter what you do, as long as you do what you want to do? It isn't what you do. It's what you are that counts, Old Cockorum."

The existence, somewhere in London, of a united and autocratic caste of social lawgivers, distinct from and superior to ordinary humanity, before whom all candidates for admission to that brilliant and happy assemblage called Society must, one day or other, present themselves for

judgment, had by now become for Joan a delicious, disturbing reality. Miss Mordaunt's system made constant reference to Society. Joan conceived it, concretely, as a crowded ballroom where a great number of very fashionable and distinguished people, who all knew one another intimately and none of whom she herself knew, were looking at her with cold superciliousness as she entered the room, and deciding whether she was worthy to be admitted to their elect company. This ballroom was situated in the most fashionable part of London, in close proximity to another, still more exclusive and brilliant, called the Court. In these two rooms and in passage between them Society existed in permanent evening frocks and dress suits, variegated by splendid uniforms. And to this goal Joan's small soul was set with the faith of the compass-needle in the Pole. Marjory's theory of innate eligibility for this worldly Paradise filled her, therefore, with a profound dejection. She wept softly in the darkness that night because her father, instead of being a gloriously-wounded officer of the Royal Field Artillery and a D. S. O., was a common farmer.

"What are you snuffing about?" demanded a sleepy voice from the other bed, after a little while.

Joan made no reply then. But next morning, when she had drawn on one stocking, she paused in the act of heeling the other, and looked towards Marjory's reflection in the common mirror.

"If your mother's mother's grandmother was the daughter of a baronet," she began, and stopped, irresolute.

Marjory, fiercely preoccupied with the removal of an undue quantity of brown hair from her comb, paid no attention to this uncompleted conundrum. But later that day she learned from Joan the moving history of Miss Phoebe Langley of Langley Hall.

"I didn't tell you before, Marjory," explained Joan, "because it was so long ago. But I suppose it would count, wouldn't it?"

Marjory stared at her mercilessly.

"Count?" she repeated. "Count? How? Count what?"

"I mean," urged Joan timidly, "do you think . . . Her father was a baronet. . . . A thing like that would count, I mean,—wouldn't it?"

Her friend grunted. "Oh, don't be a snob, Joan," she said, succinctly, and Joan, abashed by this scathing rebuke, blushed painfully.

But by the end of that day every girl at St. Angela's knew that Joan's great-great-grandmother had been the daughter of a baronet. And though Marjory affected to make light of this aristocratic legend, her flippancy, Joan felt, had lost its former half-veiled derision and had become the chaff of a candid equal. Her hope of ultimate social salvation revived.

§ ii

They became inseparable.

Joan, while preserving a guarded reticence as to her own home surroundings, quickly acquired at second-hand an intimate acquaintance with the characters of Marjory's parents, her two brothers, and a confusingly large number of uncles, aunts and cousins. The two brothers, from the first, claimed her strongest interest. Their photographs adorned the mantelpiece of Number 19, and represented two jolly, self-confident boys of fourteen and sixteen respectively, both much their sister's superiors in the matter of personal goodlooks. The elder, Victor, was Joan's favourite; the younger, Harold, looked, she thought, a little too cheeky. According to Marjory's account of them they were rather duffers at swats but pretty decent at games—especially Victor, who had hopes of his fez. Joan became familiar with other cabalistic terms: "frowst," and "tosh," and "dringer," and "lift," and "turf." Her photograph was sent to Harrow and returned with the highly-flattering criticism, "Joan Velvin seems to be a pretty decent kid."

The window of Number 19 faced the south, and, as it lay immediately under the roof, the room on summer nights was uncomfortably hot. On the landing outside a step-ladder led to a skylight through which it was possible to reach the roof. Under the stars the two girls picnicked on fine nights, in dressing-gowns. Buttered rolls, potted meats, and lemonade, followed by interminable chocolates, formed the usual fare of these feasts. Astronomy was not taught at St. Angela's, and for Joan the myriad worlds that hung above her pigtailed head had neither names nor meaning. Sometimes, however, the brilliance of a planet or the swift passage of a falling star attracted her attention, and for a moment or so she stared silently upward, while her tongue revolved pleasurably within her mouth one of the chocolate-nougats which she preferred to all other forms of nutriment. Occasionally they smoked, and Joan learned to inhale. But her complicity in this transgression was inspired merely by the desire to please her beloved Marjory.

The exclusiveness of Number 19, which was a point of honour with its occupants, allowed itself upon occasion a strictly limited hospitality. Elsie Warrender and her sister Phyllis, because their father was in the Navy, Madge Britton, because her brother was also at Harrow, and Muriel Wright, because her mother had been at school with Mrs. Holthurst, were permitted from time to time to share the guilty joys of its midnight revelries. The Warrenders, two pretty, quiet girls, who bored Marjory a little but whom Joan rather admired, returned these civilities by occasional invitations to their mother's house in Leigh Woods; the other guests by pretentious but feeble imitations of Number 19's audacities.

The Old Gunner came one afternoon in the first week of June, just after the signing of the Peace of Vereeniging. Joan was introduced, and fell instantly in love with the lean, brown man whose left hand clasped hers with boyish friendliness. He carried them off to a sumptuous tea at a restaurant

in Park Street, followed by shopping of, to Joan, amazing extravagance, and at the gates of St. Angela's slipped a sovereign into Joan's hand while he directed her attention to an entirely imaginary balloon.

"Oh!" gasped Joan, scarlet-faced. "Oh! Thank you *so* much."

"Most extraordinary thing," said the Colonel, ". . . that balloon's gone. Most extraordinary."

His white teeth showed for an instant, extraordinarily white beneath his little trim moustache. His twinkling eyes met Joan's with extraordinary friendliness. He raised his hat punctiliously with the slight awkwardness of his left arm, and departed, an idol.

"Oh, Marjory!" cried Joan afterwards, as they reviewed the afternoon from their respective beds, "I *do* love your father."

"Not a bad old sort, The Gunner," said Marjory dispassionately. "Good legs. Awful kid when you know him really, though."

§ iii

Joan's first visit to Manton House was a fortnight of rich, saturating happiness, thirteen days of blazing sunshine, tennis, boating excursions on the Avon, and the open admiration of the Holhurst boys, who from the first admitted her to the frank freemasonry of the family. She learned to scull and to punt, and to face with some beginnings of confidence the rigours of a masculine service. From morning until night the four young people and the no less youthful Colonel "ragged" joyously. Mrs. Holhurst, a quiet, rather frail woman, smiled peacefully on their turbulence, always from a little distance, reproachful only on the head of unpunctuality at meal-hours.

The house lay between Bath and Bradford-on-Avon, and to both these places Joan was taken behind two skittish chestnuts whose glossy coats, showy action and glittering

harness attracted pleasurable attention from mere pedestrians. Returning from Bath one afternoon, they encountered a steam-roller, and bolted. For a mile or so the carriage appeared to Joan at each instant upon the point of annihilating disaster. Marjory and her mother, apparently unmoved, continued a conversation with reference to the food at St. Angela's. Joan, a little paler than usual, contrived to maintain a tolerable composure and to resist the temptation to rise to her feet, even when the wheels of the vehicle descended the perilously steep bank of a ditch. She was much gratified when, at the dinner-table that evening, Mrs. Holthurst stated that she herself had been "rather frightened," but that Joan had been "as cool as a cucumber."

There were frequent invasions by bands of cheerful young people of both sexes from Bath and the neighbourhood. The picturesque old Tudor house and its old-world grounds rang with the clamour of high-pitched, laughing voices, the melodies of the latest musical comedies sung, whistled, and hammered on the long-suffering Bechstein, and the barking of half-a-dozen dogs of assorted breeds which scurried to and fro amidst silk stockings and flannel trousers in delirious excitement. Enormous quantities of strawberries and cream, ices, and shandy-gaff were consumed beneath the shade of the two great cedars on the velvety lawn. Through the noisy gaiety discreetly-friendly maids and a masterful, clean-shaven butler moved helpfully and noiselessly. Elder people accompanied sometimes the younger guests. Joan was amazed to discover that a short, fat little man, with a head completely bald and a marked cast in one eye, with whom she had discussed such unlordly things as stamp-collecting and wasp-bites, was not only a lord but a V.C. to boot. She partnered a Cabinet Minister in mixed doubles, and flirted with a Major-General, who took an extraordinary interest in her long, slim legs. These experiences revised and readjusted various standards, which she now perceived to have been hitherto too exacting.

One morning, with abrupt gruffness, Victor presented her with a quarter-plate Kodak camera, declaring that he was "fed up," personally, with photography, but that, as it was fitted with a Zeiss-Tessar lens, she would probably get some pretty decent pictures with it. For the remainder of her visit she made such assiduous use of this gift that the resulting prints completely filled the large album which Harold, not to be outdone, handed to her at parting with a laconic, "I got you this."

Towards the end of the fortnight there appeared at Manton one afternoon a dark, handsome, hatchet-faced boy, who smiled perpetually, rather insolently, and, though he affected to despise tennis, defeated the redoubtable Victor with apparent ease. After the game a discussion took place as to the respective merits of Harrow and Eton. The hatchet-faced boy, whose name was Cecil Torrington, and who took no notice whatever of Joan that afternoon, was, it became clear, an Etonian. The argument began politely but became finally so heated that the Colonel intervened diplomatically with a challenge to any person there present to defeat him left-handed. The languid Cecil accepted this defiance, and to Joan's intense delight was ingloriously worsted.

"I hate your friend Cecil," she confided afterwards to Victor. "He is horribly conceited. And I don't think he is a bit good-looking, do you?"

"Pretty decent at tennis," replied the magnanimous Victor. He fiddled silently with his shoe-lace for a moment. "All that rot he talked . . . about Eton . . . you know . . . that was all rot, you know. Just lift."

"I should think so," said Joan warmly. "I like Harrow boys ever so much better."

Despite her dislike for the hatchet-faced boy, she hoped a little that he would come again to Manton before the close of her visit. But he did not reappear. The last afternoon arrived; Mrs. Holthurst kissed her maternally and hoped that next time she would make a longer stay; the boys shook hands

silently; the Colonel and Marjory escorted her to the station. When she could no longer see them from the carriage-window a desolating choking loneliness filled her heart.

§ iv

For some days after her return to Overbarrow she withdrew herself from her father and mother and the interests of the household into an apathetic and distant silence. She could not be induced to speak, save by persistent questioning and in the briefest of phrases, of her visit to Manton, and sat for hours in her bedroom alone, lost in melancholy souvenirs.

The re-painting and re-papering had been completed during her absence, and if the paper looked of poorer quality on the walls than it had appeared in the contractor's office, it was at all events clean and bright. Fresh curtains had been put up and the chair with the broken back replaced by a sound one. A marked improvement in the light of the two re-decorated rooms had resulted from the whitewashing of their ceilings. But beside her vivid dream of the large, daintily-furnished bedroom at Manton they appeared tiny . . . ugly . . . poor.

On the deal chest-of-drawers, which was also a dressing-table, the photograph-album was placed for a little while at hand for constant reference. Each print had for Joan its own thousand poignant associations which she retraced minutely as she hung over it. "This day week, just before tea, I took that," or "I took that on the morning of the Saturday we went to Bradford," or "Victor jogged my elbow with his racquet while I was taking that." From the past her thought drifted to the present. What were they doing then . . . at three o'clock in the afternoon? Her imagination evoked the two tennis-courts, the flannelled, laughingly-earnest boys, the never-resting Marjory, brown as her brothers, the Colonel lighting a cigarette a little awkwardly with his left hand; the neat, smiling maids with their white streamers advancing

with tea-things from the house; Mrs. Holthurst in her wicker chair with her novel; the dogs, always in the way, forever snapping vainly at the flies. Perhaps they were on the river that afternoon. Perhaps the boys had gone to Bath to play cricket. She remained motionless, lost in reverie, until her mother's voice, impatiently, summoned her to help, unwilling and tongue-tied, in the peeling of potatoes or the ironing of handkerchiefs.

Gradually, however, this phase of purposeless discontent and sentimentality passed, and was succeeded by one of more aggressive criticism. Her father's table manners, which offended her greatly—especially his noisy mastication and his preference for drinking tea from a saucer—were subjected to the persistent rebuke of raised eyebrows, cold stares and colder smiles. As the offender remained completely unconscious of these demonstrations his daughter came at last to wounding speech.

"Why do you put so much into your mouth at the same time, Pater?" she would ask; or "Aren't you afraid of cutting your lip with that knife?" or "You have a table-napkin, Pater. It is just as easy to use it as the back of your hand."

Her father submitted to these assaults with unmoved good-humour. "Don't you be so partikler with your Dad, see," or "Na, then, don' you be watchin' every mouthful I takes, Miss Partikler," was his strongest protest. His unruffled, stolid, complacency was maddening. And Joan, looking at his huge coarse hands, with their shapeless, black-rimmed nails, at his generally unshaven face, at the greasy creases of his waistcoat and his trousers and his mud-caked, enormous boots, thought of the Old Gunner's beautiful crisp cleanliness and smartness, and shuddered ragingly.

The project of inviting Marjory upon a return visit to Overbarrow, with which Joan had distracted herself during the dreary train journey from Bradford to Westbridge, was abandoned. Evening after evening Joan walked to Stretton Camp, and, from the rampart beneath which the White Horse

sprawled in immense ugliness across the turf, looked out over the flat expanse of lowland to the north-west, where, amongst the trees, Bath lay invisible and, a little to the right, the spire of Bradford Church took the sun. Somewhere between them lay Manton. Her eyes searched the distances, veiled by sunlit haze or, before rain, so close to her that but an hour's walk seemed to intervene between her and the garden of her longings. Field by field she measured across the orderly chequer of pasture and crop the path which would lead her most directly thither. Often she followed with regretful envy the slow flight of a crow, flapping blackly into the sunset. She returned to the farm as to a prison, leaden-footed and home-sick, heedless of the glory of the evening sky behind her, heedless of the meal that awaited her coming with impatience.

One evening as she descended the slope of the ramparts to the road at the spot where it passed through the fortifications of the camp, she encountered a tall, thick-set young man in breeches and leggings, who had ascended the hill from Stretton. His whistling, which she had heard before he came within her view, ceased as his eyes fell upon her, and, after a long, serious stare, he bade her good-evening and raised his cap. As her path lay for a little distance in the direction in which he was walking, she lingered on the rampart until he had passed the point at which the track to Overbarrow diverged to the left from that which he was following. A slight hesitation, an unusual intentness in his look, and a certain diffident friendliness in his greeting, had conveyed to her the impression that he had for a moment thought of stopping for further converse but, finding nothing to say, had abandoned the idea. Upon her return to the farm she learned that he was probably the son of the new tenant of Pluckharrow, a farmer named Purney from the neighbourhood of Chippenham, with whom Velvin had already formed some slight acquaintance. His son Velvin pronounced to be a civil-spoken, sensible-seeming young man.

But Joan had formed an unfavourable impression of his solemn, heavy face and awkward, powerfully-built figure; and at her father's approval of him made a disdainful grimace.

"It's all very well to turn up your nose, Miss Partikler, see," said her father, dislodging the ashes from a grimy clay pipe with the enormous blade of his pocket-knife. "Some day, mebbe, you'll be glad enough to have half as good a man as young Purney comin' after you, see." He winked across at his wife. "Mebbe he plays lawn-tennis. Or mebbe he'd like to have his photograph took havin' afternoon tea."

Perceiving from Joan's angry eyes and heightened colour that this shaft had gone home, Velvin hummed for some minutes with arch humorousness, and then retired behind his newspaper, from which concealment he despatched another knowing wink at his wife. Joan, trembling with fury, sprang up abruptly from her chair, and left the dining-room, slamming the door behind her.

"Now, what's the use of hurting the child that way, Martin?" protested Mrs. Velvin.

Velvin laid his newspaper on his knees.

"She won't take no hurt from me, Mother," he said slowly. "It's her new friends as'll hurt her, not her old ones. I see what you can see. And I know what you know. An' that'll tell you that the roots are for the ground and the bottom. I doubt we be doin' the best for Joan, Martha, as much as we're doin' for her."

"Oh, you and your doubts . . ." said Mrs. Velvin impatiently.

§ v

One interminable summer day followed another, without event, save the arrival of a brief letter from Marjory and the composition of a voluminous reply, to post which Joan walked either into Stretton or to the more distant Westbridge, glad of any pretext to escape from the stagnant loneliness of

the farm. On several occasions she encountered Caleb Purney, to whom and to whose father she had been formally introduced by her mother outside Stretton Church. The young man, shy despite his twenty-one years and his seventy-three inches, raised his hat with a respectful "Good morning, Miss Joan," or "Good day, Miss Joan," and appeared, when alone, always on the point of stopping, but always passed on. Sometimes his father accompanied him, a tight-mouthed man of fifty, with greying whiskers, high, hunched shoulders, and hard eyes behind which lurked always a grim amusement. Beyond a stare, half-hostile, half-mocking, the elder Purney took no part in his son's greeting of their neighbour's daughter. Joan disliked meeting them, together or separated, intensely, and when she perceived them soon enough avoided them by wide detours.

In Stretton, too, she avoided her parents' friends, more especially the familiar, curious women who pestered her with questions about things which were plainly no concern of theirs. Her pert curtness and "snippetty" nods began to form matter for unfavourable comment. The gossips of Stretton agreed that "that Joan of Martha Velvin's" was getting above herself, and would be the better for a real smart smacking. This suggested interference with Mrs. Velvin's authority, which quickly reached her ears through the verger's wife, aroused merely her contemptuous indignation. She ceased to deal with the too-outspoken wife of the Stretton grocer, and the coolest of nods replaced on Sunday mornings the handshake with which for over twenty years she had greeted the proprietress of the "White Horse" hotel. More and more apparent each day became her tacit alliance with Joan against the stubborn, narrow conservatism of her husband. More and more ambitious grew her solitary musings in the dining-room and her confidential communings with Amy Lidgett in the kitchen.

On the last day of July it occurred to Joan to ascertain the day of the week upon which September the tenth, the

date of St. Angela's reassembling, would fall. The calendar from which she obtained this information brought to her mind that which she had made to mark off the days to Frank Hyde's return from school, nearly two years before. For the first time since his abrupt exit from her life she considered him, a memory still in the main distinct, but in many places already blurred and vague. No trace of his once overwhelming interest appeared now to remain save the fact that he had died amongst the nettles beside the barn. But a visit to the scene of the tragedy brought to her mind the cigarette-end which she had discovered there on that long-ago Tuesday evening. And then, out of oblivion, the green cardboard box on the top of the press in the spare bedroom leaped almost startlingly into her recollection.

Investigation disclosed the fact that while the box still lay in its hiding-place, the cigarettes which it had contained had been abstracted from it—probably, she surmised, by the workman who had whitewashed the ceiling of the room. This intrusion upon the secret robbed it of its last wan gleam of glamour. The box was thrown upon the rubbish-heap in the yard, where for some weeks it lingered in a slow and grimy dissolution until it disappeared, finally, in one of Amy Lidgett's monthly bonfires.

August passed, wet and thundery, a bad harvest month. On the third of September Joan began the packing of her trunk. "This night week," she wrote to Marjory that day, "we shall be back in dear old Number 19."

She discovered, to her surprise, upon her return to St. Angela's that she was now nearly an inch taller than Marjory; also that her friend's enthusiasm at their re-meeting was much more restrained than her own. Marjory's openly-expressed regret at finding herself once more in "such a beastly hole" disappointed her painfully.

§ vi

On the last night of their last term at St. Angela's, when for the last time they had dismantled the walls and bookshelves and mantelpiece of Number 19, and had made a round of farewell visits to other similarly-denuded rooms, Joan and Marjory seated themselves on their respective beds, and having stared for some time in silence at their already locked and labelled trunks yawned simultaneously and loudly. And because of the utter flatness and boredom of their yawns they glanced at one another, averted their eyes, and then laughed mirthlessly and with a faint embarrassment.

They had intended, for old association's sake, to hold a farewell banquet on the roof. But early in the evening a drizzling downpour had set in, accompanied by a chill and most unsummerlike wind. Now the rain blew in disheartening gusts against the window-panes, and it was clear that the feast must be held, if it was to be held, indoors. But the materials for it reposed, still in their unopened wrappings and bags, on the lower portion of Joan's counterpane, neglected and forgotten. In the devastating dullness of its last night Number 19 revolted gloomily at the thought of food.

Marjory rose to her feet, laughed again wryly, and stretched her arms towards the ceiling.

"Let's go to bed. There's nothing else to do," she said, and began to unhook her skirt.

To Joan this tame conclusion appeared almost incredible. During her last year, by virtue no less of her close union with Marjory, who had been Captain of the school, than of her own dignity as head of the Fifth, she had tasted the sweets of an unquestioned authority. She had been admitted to the Principal's frankest confidence, consulted, with her ally, even anxiously upon the gravest and most delicate details of the government of nearly a hundred girls. She had grown to consider herself a vital and essential factor in the school's

successful existence. Yet, by the simple stripping of the walls of Number 19 and the huddling of her clothes and her books and her photographs into a trunk, the impossible amputation had been performed, without tragedy or thrill, expostulation or regret, surprise or dismay or sensation of any kind on the part of any one. In Number 15 some of the Fifth who were to return to St. Angela's after the holidays had discussed, in her presence and Marjory's, the chances of the probable candidates for the school captaincy and for the tenancy of Number 19. Marjory, already dethroned, had listened to these speculations with amazing meekness.

They had left Number 15 unnoticed—they whose appearance in that room a few days before would have been received as condescension and an honour, with gratified and respectful enthusiasm. They had climbed in silence to Number 19, had seated themselves in silence on their beds, and . . . in a yawn . . . the last flicker of their glory had passed.

She, too, rose to her feet, a tall, slim girl of seventeen, and began to take off the well-made tweed suit in which she was to travel by the first available train to Westbridge next day. This unusually early departure was due to the fact that Marjory was to attend in the afternoon her first officially grown-up garden-party, and that her frock required certain alterations, to be effected by a visit to a Bath dressmaker in the course of her homeward journey. At Bath their long partnership would be definitely dissolved. The Holthursts were going abroad for the remainder of July and August, and subsequently for some weeks to Scotland. After that Marjory was to go for a year to a *pensionnat* at Boulogne. There would be no visit to Manton for Joan that summer.

As usually happened, Marjory was in bed before Joan had begun the preparation of her golden mane for the night. When, preparatory to switching off the light, Joan made the customary inquiry, "All right?" there was no reply. In the darkness she made her way cautiously between the two trunks

toward the bed; then, swayed by an overwhelming impulse, fluttered across the room, found Marjory's face with eagerly-groping hands, and covered it with passionate kisses.

With an embarrassed laugh Marjory, after a moment, repulsed her, then, regretting the rebuff, embraced her at haphazard in a bear-like hug.

"Never mind, Old Cockorum. It isn't the end. It's only the beginning."

"Ah," said Joan, ". . . for you. . . ."

"Oh, rot!" said Marjory, yawning. "You've got the whole world before you, my dear. Don't let's be sloppy. Let's have some of those chocs."

CHAPTER VI

§ i

ON a still, sunny May afternoon nearly two years later Joan was sitting on the bank that sloped gently southwards from the little plantation which had concealed her first secret meetings with Frank Hyde. She was reading, earnestly, the opening chapter of "The Marriage of William Ashe." Beside her, on an unopened copy of the day's "Daily Telegraph" lay "Jess." Occasionally she paused to flick a ladybird from the page or to raise her eyes to the crest of the rising ground facing her, across which a plough moved slowly backwards and forwards against the sky. The bank on which she sat was golden with buttercups and rockroses. Through the tender greenery of the branches which jutted above her head the sky was a deep, hot azure. Joan wore the linen costume of cool grey and the broad-brimmed Panama in which she had walked that morning into Westbridge to obtain at Smith's her supply of literature for the week-end. Her stockings were of grey silk; her shoes of grey suède. If you had examined closely the nail with which she flicked away the ladybirds you would have perceived that it had been carefully filed and polished. If you had opened the little suède bag which lay concealed beneath the "Daily Telegraph" you would have discovered in it a cigarette-case, a box of matches, a tiny handkerchief faintly redolent of violets, a little mirror, a powder-puff, and a small bottle containing lavender oil.

In two years Joan's body had grown a little fatter, her face a little thinner. Her nose was now perfectly straight and the corners of her mouth had, in repose, a tendency to droop slightly. These small adjustments had accentuated

surprisingly her resemblance to the crayon portrait over the drawing-room mantelpiece, which was now for her a source of secret pride and consolation.

Against the sky, in the long field, fallow since the preceding harvest, which was being prepared for the sowing of a snatch crop of vetches, her father travelled doggedly from west to east and from east to west behind his patient, plodding horses, swaying to the strains of the plough with the loose pliancy of a youth. Parallel with him moved two other teams, driven respectively by Samuel Watts and Young Henery, the son of Henry Meade. Despite his sixty-five years, Velvin found no serious difficulty in keeping abreast of Young Henery, compensating for his slight loss in the furrow's length by superior skill in the management of team and plough at the turning. Samuel Watts, handicapped by an ulcerous leg, had fallen in nine working hours nearly three furrows behind his master. In the hot, breathless sunshine the three men trudged obstinately to and fro, looking neither to the right nor left, calling now and then a gruff encouragement or revilement to their docile, placid horses. They had begun work at six o'clock; they would continue until six o'clock. The plover had wearied of them and abandoned them, screaming injuriously.

To Joan only her father was visible, each journey across the ridge having eclipsed a little more of his figure until now it moved as if its legs had been amputated at mid-thigh. Though in her occasional glances towards the crest her eyes rested always for an instant on the crawling team and its driver, its proceedings held not the faintest interest for her. She accepted as a perfectly natural and reasonable arrangement of Providence the fact that while her father toiled backwards and forwards in the glare of the sun across that naked field, his soiled, sweat-stained shirt glued to his body, she sat, cool-skinned and daintily clad, in the shade of the beeches and hazels, reading of those Lords and Ladies, Prime Ministers and Under Secretaries, with whose manners and

customs a course of Mrs. Humphry Ward had now given her an intimate and authentic acquaintance.

It was a favourite spot of hers, out of sight of the farm, yet within a few minutes' walk of it, on windy days sheltered, on sunny days shaded, undisturbed save by the larks and the plover, the scuttle of a rabbit in the shrubs at the edge of the plantation or the distant shout of a teamster. She had become a voracious reader of fiction, often walking three times in the same week into Westbridge to exchange the novels which she borrowed from the Circulating Library. And on almost any afternoon during the two preceding summers she might have been discovered in her present position absorbed in the narrative of those dramatic joys and sorrows which appeared to form the substance of all existence save her own.

With the exception of one episode those two years had been for her a period of amazing and dismaying uneventfulness. Since the morning on which for the last time she had passed out through the iron gates at St. Angela's, with the exception of that one episode, nothing had happened. Day after day she had risen, eaten, performed a certain limited amount of housework or walked into Westbridge or Stretton, discussed with her mother, for the thousandth time, the same petty, threadbare things in the same mechanical phases, read a little, dreamed a little, fretted a little, and gone to bed. Occasional excursions to Trowbridge or to Bath had only accentuated the monotony which they had disturbed, and reminded her painfully of the existence of a world of movement and gaiety in which it seemed she had no place. She believed herself now, quite sincerely and honestly, a most unfortunate and unhappy girl.

From time to time she had speculated vaguely and irresolutely as to the possibility of escaping from the narrow backwater in which the rudderless craft of her life lay stranded so forlornly. From the perusal of the advertisement-columns of the London newspapers which she purchased occasionally at Smith's, it appeared that there was a wide and steady,

demand for the services of well-educated young women. But, considered in detail, the duties for which they were required proved to be just those for which she had neither inclination nor practical training. She had no desire to become a clerk or a shop-assistant; nor was there, beyond her discontent with her present surroundings, any reason why she should. The kind of opening which did commend itself to her was either a companionship to a wealthy, not too aged or too invalid lady, who would travel a great deal, luxuriously, or a private secretaryship to a middle-aged gentleman of distinguished manners and appearance, who would dictate in a handsome study—not an office—correspondence of a confidential and important nature, in a kindly, considerate, and not too energetic way. Openings of these particular natures did not, however, appear in the "Situations Vacant" columns of any of the newspapers which she consulted. Also, for such secretaryships as were offered, a knowledge of shorthand and typewriting was indispensable—accomplishments which for Joan could only have been acquired by a long, tiresome, and expensive daily journey to Bath. She had written a voluminous letter to Miss Mordaunt—her letters never ran to less than four pages—setting forth her discontent and her difficulties and asking for advice, and had received a brief reply, typewritten and in the third person, acknowledging Miss Velvin's communication of the —th, and stating that should an opportunity occur Miss Mordaunt would gladly bear Miss Velvin's letter in mind. The cold formality of this epistle had humiliated Joan so much that she had refused on the afternoon of its receipt to fulfil an engagement to sing two songs at a concert which Lady Pannett had organised in aid of the Westbridge Cottage Hospital.

She sang now, prettily, in a small, sweet, true voice. The old piano had been sold and replaced by a second-hand Collard & Collard, on the top of which stood photographs of Marjory Holthurst and her brothers in silver frames. Though

she had not revisited Manton or seen Marjory since their hurried parting on the platform at Bath two years before, her friend still wrote to her, irregularly but affectionately, and with no apparent diminution of loyalty. Victor had now left Sandhurst; Harold was at Oxford on his ultimate way to the Bar. Marjory's letters contained frequent references to that hatchet-faced Cecil Torrington, who had for an afternoon inspired in Joan's breast such a curious conflict of dislike and admiration. These allusions—extracts visibly from a close and constant intimacy—afforded Joan material for much private speculation, and directed her attention for the first time seriously to another possible avenue of escape from the intolerable monotony of her life at Overbarrow.

§ ii

It had come to her one afternoon a few months before, as the abrupt revelation of a monstrously cruel and desolating truth, that the lives of young girls were not, as she had hitherto implicitly believed, controlled and directed by an always wise, always interested, and always watchful power along a definite and appointed course towards a definite and appointed end. She had been re-trimming a hat that afternoon in her bedroom, thinking of nothing more grave than a slight discrepancy between the shade of a ribbon and that of the cotton with which she was tacking it to the straw. She had paused for a moment to consider her work, and in a flash that brutally disillusioning revelation had fallen upon her and overwhelmed her.

Until that afternoon, until that moment, there had always appeared to her to be an intelligent plan, a coherent, deliberate system behind the experiences which had so far constituted for her life and the living of it. Every step of her childhood had been made under the control of the father and mother who had obviously been provided for that purpose. The guidance of her girlhood by Miss Mordaunt's

benevolent and capable hands had been still more obviously the provision of that wise and interested power. From her earliest memory until she had left St. Angela's the plain and clear desire of the world—that is to say, of the authoritative world of fathers and mothers and school Principals and such elder and responsible people—had been to urge her along a straight, safe path of industrious and virtuous endeavour, to aid and encourage her along the way, to assure her of permanent and satisfying reward at the journey's ending. The permanent and satisfying reward would undoubtedly take its usual and almost inevitable form. Everything having proceeded satisfactorily so far, the wise and interested power who had fed and clothed and educated her would, she had no doubt, arrange for her marriage within a reasonable period to a husband who, for the remainder of her life, would charge himself with its comfort and happiness and security. Probably she would have children. Ultimately, she supposed, she would die; but she did not believe this.

Such, so far, had been Joan's simple conception of the cosmic scheme, apprehended vaguely rather than thought of with any clearness or consecutiveness. Abstract speculation held for her no attraction whatever; invincibly her mind returned to the concrete, the actual, the visible. It had never occurred to her until that afternoon of disillusionment to question the aims and methods of that wise and interested power of hers—a kind of earthly managing-director to the God whom Miss Mordaunt's system banished politely to the chilly Heaven that was his proper place—nor to ask herself definitely what she desired it should do with her, nor to entertain the least doubt that the events which lay a few hours or a few weeks or a few months or a few years in front of her, waiting to happen, had been immutably resolved upon since the beginning of things for her private and particular good and advantage. With cheerful confidence she had tripped along the smooth, orderly path that led to the happy future. At every step a friendly signpost had encouraged her and

applauded her progress. Why should she turn aside or faint beside the way?

And then, without warning, the path had ended and the sign-posts had disappeared. Behind, dreamlike, lay the irrevocable; in front, after all, only the bare, lonely downs, the little secluded farmstead, the score of familiar, heavy faces, from whom the journey had begun. At the end of her eighteenth year Joan had found herself at the precise point from which she had started.

It became plain to her that there was no plan, no wise and interested Planner. No one had foreseen or arranged anything. No one could foresee or arrange anything. Things happened . . . just anyhow. Her father and her mother and Miss Mordaunt and all those prudent and authoritative people, so far from being the chosen instruments of a Great Purpose, as they had purported to be, were simply blind, feebly-struggling accidents in the path of the blind Juggernaut of Chance. Everything was chance: birth, life, death, health, success, good-looks, friendship, happiness, marriage . . . everything. The discovery of this sweeping and annihilating verity had affected her with the bitterness of a betrayal. She had abandoned there and then the trimming of her hat as a pitiful futility, and for several days had deliberately refrained from praying to a God so impervious to and so detached from the welfare of His creatures. The tidiness which her mother demanded from pie-crusts and bed-spreads and door-mats Joan demanded of her Creator. Although presently she resumed her morning and evening prayers to Him her faith in Him never quite recovered from the shock of that first realisation of His haphazard and offhand treatment of herself.

The strain of placid stubbornness which she had inherited from her father, and the natural elasticity of eighteen asserted themselves quickly, however, in a reaction of defiant determination. Since Heaven refused to concern itself with her, Joan saw that she must depend upon her own resources

of will and enterprise. Her desires were definite and not inordinate. She began to ask herself with what degree of attainment she could content herself.

She desired, above all and first of all, to escape from Overbarrow, to sever herself from it completely, if possible to obliterate it from her memory. She desired a life of smooth and gracious gaiety, surrounded by pleasant, well-bred people with clear, quiet voices and sympathetic, understanding minds—like the people she had met at Manton. She desired to live in a big, pleasant house with a large number of spacious, airy, beautifully-furnished rooms; a house near a large town, yet in the country; a house with a big, well-kept garden, tennis-courts, red-brick stables covered with ivy, and a poultry-yard; with a few shady old trees, a lily-pond, and twining walks; a number of efficient servants, a couple of dogs, a few Guernseys grazing in an adjacent field, several horses, a grand piano, and electric light: a house, in fine, like Manton. Against this peaceful and amiable background she desired to move in a succession of pretty frocks, the graceful and smiling hostess of her graceful, smiling guests. And, always close at hand, always fondly attentive, always picturesque, she desired a husband, aged about twenty-five, somewhere about six feet in height, slim-waisted and broad-shouldered, a good dancer, a good tennis-player, a good horseman, and, preferably, a soldier. In all this the influence of her impressions of Manton was apparent even to herself—even in her conception of that ideal husband whose characteristics combined the most admired traits of Colonel Holthurst and his sons. The Gunner had indeed crystallised for Joan the perfect knight. His empty sleeve was so almost passionately dear to her that for its sake she would have accepted cheerfully a husband with one arm.

It was just about this period—the rain-soaked close of January, when darkness fell upon the desolate landscape around Overbarrow at four o'clock, and the wind moaned for weeks in the beeches surrounding the farm without the respite

of an hour—that Marjory's letters began to contain those frequent and, to Joan, significant allusions to Cecil Torrington. From her meditations upon marriage as a probability for Marjory, Joan turned with resolution to an estimate of its possibility for herself. In the course of a long and solitary walk in the direction of Warminster on the last day of January, beneath a leaden sky across a dead, dun earth, she arrived at the definite conclusion that nothing would induce her to marry a farmer. The range of possible selection having been thus limited to the two bachelors of her acquaintance who were not farmers and who were at all likely to marry her, she had devoted the early days of February to an earnest consideration of the respective eligibilities of these two individuals. One was the cashier at the Westbridge branch of the South-Western Counties Bank, a Mr. Popplewhite, whom she knew slightly; the other a Mr. Clements, who had recently moved into one of the newly-built bungalows in the outskirts of Stretton, who had, so far as she was aware, no occupation, and whom she did not know at all.

Her acquaintance with Mr. Popplewhite had not extended beyond such commonplaces as accompanied her occasional lodgments of her father's cheques. But she had divined in the respectful admiration of his eyes, the promptness of his attention, and the accentuated courtesy of his manner, that these brief conversations held for him a more than merely official interest. He was, she thought, nearly forty, a fresh-coloured, dark-eyed little man who wore glasses in the bank and, in his little cubicle, surrounded by bundles of notes and little heaps of gold and silver and copper, looked a much more dignified and important person than he did when encountered in the street. He was rather good-looking in a small, prim, respectable way; careful in his dress, and an ardent gardener. He lived with his mother in a little house at the east end of the town, where, in a tiny garden in which he had erected with his own hands a tiny green-house, he spent most of his leisure hours, pottering to-and-fro in an overall several sizes

too large for him. It was rumoured that, in addition to his salary from the Bank, he possessed some private means. On Saturday afternoons he was sometimes to be seen straying across the downs towards the White Horse, pausing now and then to pick a wild-flower or to follow the flight of a bird. He was an enthusiastic nature-student, and claimed to have beheld with his own eyes the only bustard that had been seen in that part of Wiltshire for fifty years. On Sundays he attended the Baptist Chapel with his mother, a frigid, thin little woman whose lips moved incessantly in the torment of a nervous twitch.

Joan's thoughts toyed a little with Mr. Popplewhite and, more especially, with those rumoured private means of his; and then, pending her next visit to the Bank, turned to the more promising Mr. Clements.

Mr. Clements possessed, obviously, greater possibilities. He had bought the bungalow which he occupied, and which he had re-christened "Hazelhatch," for seventeen hundred pounds, furnished it handsomely, entertained frequent visitors, drove a smart cob in a smart trap, and had hunted during the preceding winter with the Trowbridge pack. There was no doubt that he possessed considerable means, and that socially he was, with the exception of the Pannetts, the nearest approach to the Holthurst caste that the neighbourhood of Stretton afforded.

On her way into the village Joan had encountered him several times in the narrow lane that branched from White Horse Hill a quarter of a mile from its foot and led between high banks past the drive gates of Hazelhatch to the head of the Church Steps and the upper part of Stretton. He was an odd-looking man with a clean-shaven, rather ugly face, bright, alert eyes, a boyish figure usually attired in a tweed shooting-jacket, riding-breeches and leggings, and almost invariably smoking a pipe, which he removed politely from his mouth as Joan approached him. She found herself unable to decide as to his age; he impressed her sometimes as a young

man who looked middle-aged, sometimes as a middle-aged man who looked young. Afterwards she discovered that he was thirty-seven.

Sometimes visitors to Hazelhatch accompanied him when these meetings occurred in the narrow lane. Joan caught snatches of conversation which puzzled her. "Settled for a run, then," Mr. Clements was saying one morning to a tubby, cheerful little man who walked beside him in patent-leather boots. "I always told Barnett that what the B.P. wants always and all the time is a red nose and a joke about a mother-in-law." The remark, which produced a fat chuckle from the wearer of the patent-leather boots, intrigued its passing audience so much that she consulted Marjory in reference to it in her next letter. "Your Mr. Clements is probably an actor," wrote Marjory in reply. "Victor says they are a pretty rotten lot mostly. He sends you his love and is sorry to hear you are putting on beef."

It was Mr. Clements's habit to exercise his hunters of mornings on the downs, and from afar Joan often beheld him galloping gallantly, with flying coat-tails, sometimes followed by his groom, but more often alone. Observing that he usually followed the line of the long-disused and now almost obliterated road which had once connected Westbridge with Imber, she decided one morning towards the middle of February to turn her steps in that direction, without, however, committing herself to any more definite intention with regard to the meeting which she anticipated than the satisfaction of a desire to obtain a clearer impression of his features, his expression, and his age. She brought with her "Jude the Obscure," which she was reading at the time, less for the sake of the interest of the story, which repelled her by the humble social status of its characters, than that she might have a visible excuse for loitering along the road and a convenient retreat for her eyes should one prove necessary.

When she had proceeded half a mile or so southwards from the point at which she had joined the old road, the thud of

hoofs behind her warned her of Mr. Clements's approach. He passed thunderously, so close that a clod of turf, spurned by his charger's hoof, left a white chalk-stain on Joan's navy-blue serge skirt. Her eyes, promptly deserting the melancholy Jude, followed the horseman in his impetuous course until, a mile or so ahead of her, he turned and began to jog back along the way by which he had come. Presently he put his steed again to a gallop which carried him to within fifty yards of Joan. As he stopped to light a cigarette, she walked slowly towards him, her gaze intent upon her book until, abreast of him, she raised it to his face. Exercise and the keen air of the February morning had brought a healthy flush to Mr. Clements's usually somewhat pallid countenance, and, doubtless, inspired him with a corresponding interior good-humour with himself and all the world. As he passed he raised his hat very gracefully and said in a pleasant, cheery voice, "Good morning." Joan bowed and smiled a little, sedately, and with perfect composure, then blushed, unseen, a hot and rosy red.

After that he saluted her gravely always at meeting, and finally, through the intervention of an impetuous Irish terrier, which charged on Joan on a muddy morning from the gates of Hazelhatch, introduced himself somewhat shyly. With the clothes-brush which he insisted upon producing Joan made for some little time a display of repairing the damage done by the terrier, but obviously the only wise course was to allow the mud to dry before attempting to remove it. Mr. Clements was profuse in his apologies with which he accompanied her, bareheaded, to the gates of the next bungalow. Joan decided that though not in the least handsome and, indeed, save for the brightness of its eyes, distinctly heavy in repose, his face was interesting and, when he smiled, rather charming. The quality of his voice, and his clear-cut speech, pleased her immensely. In the course of that brief, apologetic walk he made two references to his "work" and one to a sister who, it seemed, was coming in

the early spring to stay at Hazelhatch. On her side Joan contrived to introduce the facts that she lived at Overbarrow, that she had been at school at Clifton, that Marjory, the daughter of a Colonel Holthurst who lived near Bath, was her dearest girl-friend, that she adored riding, and that she had just finished "Jude the Obscure" and was about to start on "Robert Orange." Mr. Clements's last remark as he parted from her, plainly unwillingly, outside the gates of the "Dovecot," was to the effect that if at any time Messrs. Smith failed her he would be only too happy to lend her any of his books which she cared to read. So delightful was this quickly-moving interview that, upon her homeward journey, to avoid the risk of spoiling it by a second meeting that morning, Joan climbed the precipitous hill at the lower end of the village and returned to the farm by the Upper Road.

They met with increasing frequency, and each time their chance acquaintance widened and deepened a little towards intimacy. Joan discovered the nature of those mysterious labours to which Mr. Clements referred so often.

"I find that, here, I work best in the morning," he said, one day. "One gets so confoundedly sleepy in this strong air here in the afternoon. And as for working at night . . . here . . . I find it simply impossible."

Joan turned two innocent, respectful, incurious grey eyes towards his reflective profile.

"I keep wondering what kind of work you do," she said gently.

Mr. Clements laughed pleasantly.

"Well," he said, "I don't suppose you will think me justified in describing it as work. I . . . er . . . I write a bit . . . er . . . plays . . . mostly."

"Oh!" said Joan, profoundly impressed. "I knew you were clever."

Mr. Clements laughed again pleasantly.

"You mustn't make depreciatory remarks of that sort, Miss Velvin," he said, shedding the ash of his cigarette care-

fully to leeward of her. Then, perceiving that she strove a little dubiously with the adjective, explained: "I mean . . . clever people are such bores, aren't they? I'm sick to death of clever people and cleverness."

Joan escaped hastily from the abstract.

"I should love to read some of your plays," she said intensely. "Have they . . . have they been . . . ?"

"Produced? Some of them. Some of them have done pretty well."

"In London?"

"Yes. Er . . . one of my things is running just now. . . . 'The Magic Casement.' . . . Perhaps you . . . ?"

But Joan had not heard of "The Magic Casement!" One heard of nothing in such an out-of-the-way place. She sighed; shrugged her shoulders; smiled with gentle melancholy. Would Mr. Clements believe that she had never been to London in her life?

But it became clear that Mr. Clements, who had lived most of his life in London, did not think a great deal of it, nor of the fact that she had never been there. On the other hand, he expressed a keen desire to visit Overbarrow, and appeared far more interested in the information which he obtained from her in regard to the construction of dewponds than in her friends, the Holthursts. Presently he lent her the typescript of "The Magic Casement," warning her smilingly that a necessary qualification of a good play was that it should read badly. Joan read it, thought it, privately, dull and in places crudely forced and unnatural, returned it with the assurance that she had enjoyed reading it awfully, and never afterwards made any allusion to it.

She learned that it had been preceded by two other successful plays and several unsuccessful ones, and that the best play which Mr. Clements had ever written had been refused by every manager in London and in the United States. Sometimes, he informed her, for his own amusement he wrote short stories. Joan read some of these in

various popular magazines and liked them much better than "The Magic Casement." But her amazement was unfeigned and unconcealed when one day he stated that an American newspaper had just paid him five hundred dollars for a story of eight thousand words.

"Then . . . how much does one get for a play?" she enquired.

Mr. Clements made a brief calculation.

"My best scoop, so far," he said, quite carelessly, "was 'Anna Mary'. I got something between seven and eight thousand out of her. And she still brings me in an odd hundred now and then. But I hope that 'The Magic Casement' will do a bit better than that. It will, if Marie Stormer takes it to the States."

Seven or eight thousand pounds for a play! A wave of exultant excitement thrilled Joan. Here, walking beside her, was that graceful, untroubled affluence that she desired . . . within her grasp, it seemed. She heard his voice say, "Of course, Miss Velvin, this is quite between ourselves. I . . . er . . . this is quite between ourselves," and murmured, "Oh, of course, Mr. Clements," with eyes of gentle reproach, while every nerve of her was still a-quiver with that glimpse of the Promised Land.

Gradually Mr. Clements lost for her his first rather difficult elderliness. She discovered that he was capable of outbursts of an odd, almost boyish, impulsiveness, somewhat incoherent eagernesses and enthusiasms, of which he appeared sometimes ashamed, sometimes proud. Insensibly, a cooing, playful familiarity replaced the respectfulness of her earlier attitude towards him. She began to perceive that many of the flowers which adorned the *parterre* of his conversation had but the shallowest of roots or none at all. In a fortnight she believed that she had come to the end of his surprises, and smiled a little at her first awe of him.

He arrived, informally and on foot, one afternoon at Overbarrow, and made himself so agreeable to Mrs. Velvin

that the embarrassed frigidity with which at first she received her unexpected guest disappeared almost immediately. After his departure Joan explained his visit by reference to the episode of the Irish terrier, but made no allusion to any preceding or subsequent meeting with him.

"He is not married," said Mrs. Velvin, when a silence had followed these communications. Having uttered this remark, she gazed at the carpet thoughtfully for some minutes, and then turned her face towards her daughter with a little intent, henlike movement. Joan perceived that what she had taken for a general and purposeless statement of fact was really a pertinent and significant question. These moments of penetrating shrewdness which appeared from time to time in her mother's normal stupidity always disconcerted her a little.

"I think not," she said carelessly. "In fact, I'm sure he isn't."

Mrs. Velvin coughed and resumed her profound and enigmatic contemplation of the dining-room carpet.

"You've been meeting him about," she said, after another long silence, without raising her eyes.

"Meeting him about?" repeated Joan sharply. "What do you mean, Mother?"

"You've been meeting him about," repeated her mother doggedly, "without telling me."

"Rubbish!" said Joan. "How you imagine things, Mother. Meeting him about! It's so common to talk like that."

"You ought to have told me," said Mrs. Velvin plaintively. "You'll get yourself talked about, if you're not careful."

Joan rose with the tightened lips of exasperation and left her mother to her gloom. The enormous woman sat motionless in the dimness of the low-ceilinged, narrow room until, nearly an hour later, Amy Lidgett entered with Miss Joan's afternoon tea-tray. Mrs. Velvin, whose appetite was

poor, had ceased to participate in this extra meal, preferring to wait for her husband's six o'clock tea, at which Joan seldom attended. Indeed, as far as possible, Joan avoided her father's noisy enjoyment of his food, which had grown more pronounced with advancing years and the contemplation of which aroused in her a cold fury that was all but hatred.

Laying her tray on the table, Amy Lidgett proceeded methodically to light the lamp, draw down the blinds, and replenish the fire. She was now, according to her own persistent statement, a few months short of seventy-one, and the faded dun of her scanty hair had bleached to the drab white of her eyelashes. But her high-boned cheeks preserved still their glazed apple-red, and she moved about the dining-room that afternoon with the same decisive, unhurried briskness with which, nearly nineteen years before, she had moved about the big bedroom upstairs on the afternoon on which Joan had been born.

As she turned to leave the room she glanced for the first time towards her mistress. In the lamplight two large tears which were trickling down Mrs. Velvin's fat cheeks glistened arrestingly.

"What's to do, then?" enquired Amy calmly, placing her hands upon her hips.

Mrs. Velvin sobbed loudly.

"Boo-hoo-hoo," she said. And then, volcanically, "Boo-hoo-hoo-a-hoo-hoo!"

"What's to do, then?" asked Amy again, approaching a little nearer and raising the pitch of her voice a semi-tone. But Mrs. Velvin replied only, "Boo-hoo-hoo-hoo-a-hoo. Boo-hoo-hoo-a-hoo. Hoo."

All Stretton knew, and Mrs. Velvin knew, of her Joan's trapesings on the downs with Mr. Clements. For the first time, to her knowledge, her daughter had told her a lie.

The situation having now, however, been regularised, Mrs.

Velvin presently dried her eyes and on Sunday mornings defied the gossips of Stretton by allusions to Mr. Clements of an ostentatious intimacy and a magnificent aplomb. He came again to Overbarrow, to a resplendent tea, was introduced to Joan's father, beheld his manœuvres with his saucer and his knife without a tremor, and afterwards listened to Mrs. Velvin's circumstantial history of her great-grandmother with a gratifying attention. Joan sang for him a sad little song of Lord Henry Somerset's, and smoked one of his cigarettes with easy grace. He departed regretfully, returned a few days later on horseback, with some novels and a couple of new songs which he had purchased for her in Bath. When Joan had tried these over, dilatorily, they wandered off across the downs, followed to the Lower Gate by the admiring eyes of Mrs. Velvin and Amy Lidgett.

"Just the right height for'n, she be," said Amy.

They returned, laughing, as they came up the garden walk in the frosty twilight, to a tea half-way between the lavish formality due to the presence of a stranger and the simplicity of Joan's usual repast. The glass dish containing the jam having run dry, Mr. Clements helped himself without ceremony from the pot which stood on an adjoining table. Mrs. Velvin smiled approval.

"Getting into our ways, isn't he?" she said archly, to her daughter. Joan laughed happily. In the dusk Mr. Clements's arm had encircled her and he had attempted, gently, to kiss her. She had repulsed him, but with a soft, mischievous, promising laugh. As he returned, plate in hand, to his chair, she exchanged with him a discreet, tender look.

He came again, and again in the dusk she evaded his gently eager face, this time a little resentfully. Afterwards, she explained, she would feel sorry if she had allowed him to kiss her. She knew he would think less of her if she allowed him to kiss her. He did not really want to kiss her? The sudden apparition of Henry Meade from the ground just at their feet, where he had been setting a mole-

trap, interrupted Mr. Clements's arguments as to the perfect naturalness, reasonableness and harmlessness of his osculatory desires.

March sped away thus deliciously, with incredible swiftness. The first week of April brought Miss Clements to Stretton, and on the following Sunday Joan was introduced to her by her brother on the Church Steps, and accepted an invitation to tea that afternoon at Hazelhatch. A certain cool restraint in Miss Clements's manner attracted her attention. She was a tall, rather unhealthy-looking young woman of thirty or thereabouts, with an immense quantity of black hair arranged in hard, tight coils and plaits. To most of Joan's remarks during their first interview she replied by a drawled, rather impertinent "Oh, yes," accompanied by a prolonged stare. From the first Joan disliked her immensely.

Her first visit to Hazelhatch was not a success. Clements was unusually silent, exploding at intervals into a forced and embarrassing merriment, and intervening with obvious anxiety at moments to divert the conversation from the awkward channel into which his sister's adroit cross-examination of Joan threatened perpetually to lead it. Miss Clements plainly considered that Joan required considerable explanation. She was determined to obtain the explanation and to discover by what means her simple, susceptible brother had fallen into the clutches of this indecently good-looking, well-dressed, and self-possessed farmer's daughter. She refused to be interested in St. Angela's or in the Holthursts or in Joan's devotion to the English novelists. She did not ride; she had never played games of any sort or desired to play them. She had not, it became clear, done anything in particular or desired to do anything in particular. The facts escaped that she lived with a mother and two sisters at Hampstead, and that they all considered Bernard Shaw's brain to be the most powerful and the most original brain that the world had produced since Nero's. As Joan's knowledge of Nero

was limited to his alleged fly-killing propensities, the allusion served merely to increase her dislike of her hostess.

"I suppose," said Miss Clements, when the visitor had declined a second cup of tea, "I suppose the available amusements in a place like this are not very thrilling? I suppose the old country customs still survive in a remote district like this? Or don't they?"

She enveloped Joan in an encouraging, patronising stare.

"What customs?" asked Joan, bluntly.

"Dancing, now? Do they keep up the old-fashioned country dances here?"

"There are small dances occasionally," said Joan. "Very informal affairs. They don't dance round a Maypole on the village green, if that is what you mean."

"Don't they?" drawled Miss Clements. "I thought they might. Do let me give you some more tea. No? Now . . . what kind of people go to these dances? Farming people?"

"Yes."

Miss Clements turned to her brother.

"Have you been to any of these rustic entertainments yet, Arthur?" she enquired. "Rather amusing, I should fancy. Rather useful copy, I should think."

"You've given me no sugar," said her brother curtly, extending his cup. "Don't talk shop."

Miss Clements showed several gold-stopped teeth and returned to Joan. "He's a most shameless copy-hunter, you know, Miss Velvin. He goes about picking up acquaintance with the most extraordinary people. . . ."

Joan coloured faintly.

"I think the people one meets like that, just by chance, are always the most interesting," she said hastily.

"Still," said Miss Clements, observant of her flush, "don't you think it's rather . . . well . . . rather risky? Arthur is such a gullible, dear old thing that, really, sometimes we all feel . . . quite. . . ."

The gullible, dear old thing scowled unmistakably.

"Come and look at my books," he said with a spasmodic readjustment of his features, and led the way to his study. Joan admired his well-stocked book-shelves, his photographs, and his water-colours, and discovered that she must go. Her host shook hands with her nervously in the little green-and-white porch, while his sister bowed a watchful good-bye from a carefully-calculated distance.

"To-morrow afternoon," murmured Mr. Clements, "if possible. . . ." But Joan merely said "Good-bye" coldly, and disappeared very stately between the shrubs of the little steeply-descending drive.

Next morning Mr. Clements's horse put one of its fore-feet into a rabbit hole and threw him, and broke his leg. The news was brought to Overbarrow that night by the shepherd, who had witnessed the accident and had obtained from Pluckharrow the wheelbarrow in which the injured gentleman had been wheeled down the hill to his house by one of Samuel Purney's farm-hands.

"If zo be az 'ow I 'adn't zeen 'e," declared the shepherd, "there a med a bided all day. Give I a zuvrin, 'e did. I didn't want no zuvrin. You take'n, zays 'e. If zo be az 'ow you 'adn't zeen I, zays 'e, there a med a bided all day, 'e zays. Well, zays I, if zo be az 'ow that's what you zays, zays I, I'll take'n an' thank *you*, I zays. Well, zays 'e . . ."

"Did Mr. Clements know who you were, William?" interrupted Joan.

The old man grinned and turned his far-away eyes slowly until they rested on her face.

"A knew a waz yer pa's shepherd, sartainly. 'Cause, zays 'e to I, settin' in wheelbarr', an' 'is legs dandlin' like a carkuzz, zays 'e, Tel'n at Overbarr'. Ah. Tell'n at Overbarr', zays 'e. A grew so white az a rabbit's scut when a felt bone stickin' through his skin. But a come to a 'ero when Fred Cole'n me put in wheelbarr', an' a put 'is 'and in pocket an' lugs out a zuvrin and gives it I, zee. You

take'n, zays 'e. If zo be az 'ow . . ." The narrative returned to its beginning.

One morning when the hedges of the narrow lane were clad with snowy fragrance and a cuckoo was proclaiming his arrival from the steep bank behind the church, Joan walked down to Hazelhatch to enquire as to the welfare of the injured leg. The maid who interviewed her at the door informed her that it was in plaster-of-Paris and was likely to remain there for a considerable time. On the following Sunday an elderly lady, whom Joan concluded correctly to be Mr. Clement's mother, accompanied his sister to church. Miss Clements gave her the most distant of bows. Joan made no more calls of enquiry at Hazelhatch, and in three weeks paid but a single visit to Stretton, going and returning by the Upper Road. From the top of the steep hill out of the village, across the intervening valley in which the church lay amongst its elms, she saw one morning the owner of Hazelhatch sitting on his lawn in an oddly shaped chair. In the sunlight the white bandages of the broken leg, which was supported horizontally by another chair, were conspicuous. Behind him his mother and his sister were inspecting the promise of his pergola. Joan waved her hand to him, but, obtaining no response, went dejectedly on her way.

In the last week of April Mr. Clements wrote, briefly and, as it seemed to Joan, guardedly. It had been very kind of her to call. He hoped shortly to get rid of his plaster cast, which, as the weather grew hotter, became more and more irksome, especially at night. He had written a one-act play during his convalescence and conceived a promising idea for a three-act comedy. He hoped that Joan and her mother and father were very well. And, finally, he expected in the early days of the following month to get away to Cornwall for the change which a troublesome bout of insomnia rendered advisable. He made no mention of his relatives, a fact which did not escape Joan. She replied, some days later, with careful formality.

The separation of those three weeks had softened and toned her impressions of Mr. Clements with a warm, enriching varnish of sentiment. His disappearance had left a tremendous gap in her existence. She had missed his voice, his smile, his little pleasantries, even those mannerisms of his which she admired least, enormously. The remembrance of the pressure of his arm about her waist caused her at once a throb of passionate delight and a pang of painful regret. She saw now that she had really cared for him much more than she had been aware of; that his good opinion was of great importance to her. And that she had yielded too easily pricked her to a remorseful self-condemnation. It was some consolation that she had not allowed him to kiss her.

To this phase succeeded one in which she appeared as the pathetic heroine of a hopeless romance, and in which a cruel, merciless Fate was personified by Miss Clements. But Miss Clements refused to wear this exalted and influential disguise convincingly, and became very soon again simply her own interfering, ill-willed, golliwoggish self. The practical Joan saw at last that what was slipping from between her fingers was not romance but golden opportunity. This final view of the situation was, however, even more depressing than its predecessors. When, in the first week of May, she learned that Mr. Clements had departed in a hired motor-car for Cornwall, leaving his sister in charge at Hazel-hatch, she retired to her bedroom and whimpered her hatred and contempt of him and herself and everything else in the world into the lavender-scented pillows of her bed.

The droop at the corners of her mouth accentuated itself in those dark days. Her mother's ostentatious avoidance of all allusion to Mr. Clements chafed her, until, deliberately, she drove the fond, anxious woman to speak of him, then turned on her, furiously.

"Never mention that man's name to me again, Mother,"

she cried tragically. "I wish that I had never seen his face."

The purple-brown of the spring-sown barley-fields tinged itself with emerald dust in a night, disappeared beneath a thick green pile in two mild, sunny days. The lilac in the front garden at Overbarrow faded blackly; the young green-finches left their nest amongst the laurestina bushes; the clamour of the lambing-fold above the dew-pond was silenced. Joan's life retreated once more into absolute uneventfulness. On Sundays she exchanged with Miss Clements the stiffest of movements of the head. Of her brother she heard nothing.

So she reached that afternoon in mid-May when she sat at the edge of the plantation, with "The Marriage of William Ashe" upon her grey-linen lap, the world forgetting and by the world, as it seemed, forgot.

§ iii

In the depression between the slope on which she sat and that which rose southwards to the sky from its foot was a large dew-pond, protected by a wooden railing. The deeply-rutted, grassy track which Overbarrow called its Low Road described in this part of its course a sharp-angled Z, appearing at Joan's left hand from behind the eastern end of the plantation, turning to the right past the dew-pond and, some fifty yards further on, turning southwards again behind the shoulder of the ridge on which the ploughing was going forward. Presently a tall, long-striding young man came energetically down this track, whistling unmelodiously and swinging an ash-plant. At the dew-pond he paused, catching sight of Joan above him, and after a momentary hesitation began to ascend the buttercupped slope towards her. With a dexterous, imperceptible hand Joan assured herself of the decorum of her skirts.

"Good-day, Miss Velvin," said the intruder, raising his hat convulsively, and halting with a slightly sheepish smile a few yards from her grey suède shoes.

“Good-day, Mr. Purney,” said Joan amicably. “What brings you over to this part of the world?”

“I came over to see your father about this tractor he’s thinking of buying.”

“Oh, yes,” said Joan.

The explanation seemed perfectly plausible. She was aware that her father had for some months past meditated the purchase of a tractor, and it was quite likely that he had sought the advice and assistance of the Purneys in the matter. She noted that the immense young man who stood now towering above her against the sun, so that to see him she was obliged to tilt her head back uncomfortably, was attired with considerable ornateness in a new suit of glossy blue, a bowler hat, a clean collar, and a purple tie with large circular mauve spots. She wondered a little why he had taken the trouble to invest himself with so much splendour for an interview with her father about a tractor, and why he had climbed the steep slope to disturb her unnecessarily.

“A beautiful day, isn’t it?” said the young farmer, conversationally.

“Beautiful,” agreed Joan.

“It would do no harm if we had a day’s rain, though, for the barley.”

“It doesn’t *look* like rain,” said Joan.

Caleb Purney surveyed her longly.

“Reading,” he said, with the air of one who had made an entirely original discovery by the exercise of the most cautious and delicate powers of observation and inference. “I hear you’re great for reading.”

“Indeed? Who told you that?”

“Oh, a great many tell me that.”

“It is extraordinary,” said Joan with superiority, “what an interest people take in other people.”

“They don’t read much themselves, you see,” explained Caleb, deprecatingly. “They notice a thing like that.” He

gazed upon earth and sky. "It doesn't look like rain, certainly. How is your father's wheat doing?"

"It's a little backward, Father says. But he's always grumbling."

This remark produced from Caleb a sudden bellow of laughter, followed by a sequence of meditative and digestive chuckles. It was evident that he considered it delightfully humorous, and that he was disposed to linger conversationally now that the ice had been pleasantly broken. Joan pointed to the distant plough.

"Father is over there," she said, preparing to resume Mrs. Humphry Ward.

"I'm not in a hurry," said the young man, reassuringly.

To Joan's dismay he seated himself on the ground close beside her, removed his bowler hat, examined its interior with an air of doubting seriously that it really was a hat, replaced it on his head, and, clasping his enormous hands about his knees, began to whistle softly and sociably through his teeth.

Joan looked at him, a little curiously, a little distrustfully, altogether resentfully, much as she would have regarded an intruding and uncertainly-disposed bullock. Her eyes saw a powerfully-built, healthy, not ill-looking young man, whose massive red face wore fixedly an expression of serious benevolence. These outward appearances were familiar to her, typically and impersonally. They were to be beheld, with unimportant variations, attached to any farm-machine, or farm-cart, or farm-yard in the landscape through which her life moved so wearily. They neither repelled nor attracted her. At a little distance, even she recognised and approved their utility, their appropriateness, and, above all, their respectfulness towards her own detached passage through their midst. She knew that Caleb Purney was an excellent young man, shrewd, industrious, steady, and a regular church-goer. But no faintest recollection of these estimable qualities occurred to her as she looked at him now. She

saw in him, embodied, typified, merely the local male product, the flat, awkward young man of the North Wiltshire farm, with all his flatness and awkwardness accentuated by his stiff Sunday clothes and his unaccustomed cleanliness.

Her surprise that this bucolic youth should seat himself thus familiarly beside her amongst the buttercups was no less than her annoyance at his disturbance of her solitude. She had judged him incapable of such audacious presumption, not personally—for she had never thought of him personally—but as a class. She found her place, coughed slightly, and proceeded with her reading.

“I hear your friend down there has gone away,” said Purney, after some moments, interrupting his whistling to jerk his head in the general direction of Stretton. Joan glanced at him sharply. A stronger tinge of distrust coloured her annoyance.

“My friend?” she repeated coolly. “Are you referring to Mr. Clements?”

“Yes. Gone away for a while, ain’t he?”

“I believe so.”

“Ah,” said Purney profoundly, and, seized apparently by new misgivings as to his hat, removed it and examined its lining again suspiciously. “You’ll miss your walks with him, I daresay,” he said, replacing it, resigned but unconvinced.

“I wish you would mind your own business, Purney,” said Joan with tart haughtiness. Under normal circumstances she would have addressed him, with a slight inflection of condescension, as Mr. Purney. The omission of the prefix was deliberate. Her remark was intended to appear the rebuke of an inferior.

Purney interrupted his whistling for a moment to pluck a plantain stem which he placed transversely between his lips. Finding that it interfered with comfortable sibilation, he removed it and slapped his boot with it until its head broke off.

"Mebbe it is my own business, in a sort of way, you see," he said slowly. "Mebbe there's some as thinks it's better he is gone away."

Now thoroughly aroused and suspicious, Joan searched the serious, heavy kindliness of his face for some clue to his motives, some revelation of the purpose that lay behind his low, receding forehead, over which a well-greased lock of hair escaped from beneath the brim of his hat. To her consternation she detected in the china-blue eyes which he turned to her, parodied ludicrously but unmistakable, an expression with which her more intimate passages with Mr. Clements had rendered her familiar—an expression fond yet eagerly rapacious, intent, slightly furtive. . . . Understanding flashed upon her. This enormous, solemn bumpkin had put on his Sunday clothes and his clean collar and had come two miles across the downs in pursuit of her. Doubtless he had heard that her father intended to buy a tractor, and had seen an opportunity to visit Overbarrow on a plausible pretext. If her father had desired to discuss the matter with him, she saw now that he could have and would have done so on any of the preceding Sundays, after church.

"What do you mean?" she demanded imperiously; and, as he remained silent, repeated the question, after a pause.

"You needn't snap my head off," said Purney reasonably. "I'm only saying in a friendly way that I think you're well rid of some one we both know of. It was all very well for him to amuse himself if he got the chance . . . that's his affair. But it was a foolish thing for you to let him do it. You might have known nothing would come of it but every one in Stretton laughing at you behind your back."

For a speechless moment Joan gasped, outraged, incapable even of thought. "How dare you speak to me like that?" she cried in a voice that rage choked almost to a squeak. "You horrible cad! How dare you speak to me like that!"

"Oh, come to that," said Purney tranquilly. "I'm not afraid to say my mind out to any one. There's no call for

you to be so hot and all with me because I say, friendly-like, what I think."

"I don't care what you think, you great booby," glared Joan. "I don't care a tuppenny straw what you think. I shall speak to my father about your impertinence."

She rose to her feet and with trembling fingers began to collect her paraphernalia. Purney watched her calmly.

"Oh, your father's a sensible man," he said slowly. "He doesn't think any more of your gentleman friends nor I do, come to that. It's no pleasant thing for a respectable man to have his daughter talked about the way you've been getting yourself."

As he said these words he turned his head towards the eastern side of the plantation, from which direction an unfamiliar sound now came on the still air in murmuring vibrations. The murmur grew louder, more defined; resolved itself into the beat of an approaching motor-car. The intrusion of this phenomenon, unprecedented in that remote, inaccessible spot, held them both silent for some listening seconds.

"Well, I'm danged," said Purney, with a grin. "A motor-car!"

Joan straightened her hat with a twitch and began to descend the yellow slope towards the dew-pond. The young man sprang to his feet and followed her, expostulating.

"Wait a bit," he said, striding to overtake her. "Don't be in such a hurry. Don't get flying off in a temper for nothing."

"If you don't leave me alone," said Joan, turning to face him with sudden viciousness, "I'll box your ears."

"Do," replied Purney calmly. "I don't mind."

"Bah!" blew Joan. "I wouldn't touch you for all the money in the world."

She turned away; the young farmer detained her by the skirt of her linen coat. With all the strength of her vigorous

body behind her little clenched fist she struck murderously at the red, grinning expanse of his face. The blow did far more damage to her own knuckles and wrist than to the rock-like chin upon which it fell; but its impact was quite severe enough to eclipse Purney's grin and to arouse him to maliciousness. Joan felt the stitches of her coat give, felt herself enveloped in the suffocating embrace of a monstrous arm, felt a gigantic hand beneath her chin, drew back her head serpent-like, and fastened her teeth in the hand's hairy surface savagely. And of this tableau the surprised and diverted occupants of the motor-car which was now rounding the foot of the slope had time to catch a glimpse before, with a hiss of startled pain, Purney released his prisoner, who thereupon rushed down the slope, shedding books and paper and bag as she came, and with a wildly-waving arm signalling to the driver of the car to stop.

"Wo-ah!" cried Marjory Holthurst from the back seat. "It's Joan. It's Joan." With a jerk the car came to a standstill. The young man who was driving put on the hand-brake with the conscientiousness of the novice, and turned then to stare from Joan to Purney, who stood motionless on the spot where she had left him, switching his ash-plant. While Marjory, who had jumped out before the car had stopped, hastened to meet Joan, her mother leaned forward towards the driver.

"A tragedy, I should say . . . not a comedy. Poor Joan looks frightened to death."

"I shouldn't have recognised her," said the young man, continuing to stare. "Arcadia has discovered silk stockings, I perceive. Strepthon looks extremely peevish about something, doesn't he?"

Smiling now, if rather confusedly, Joan shook hands with her old school-fellow, bowed to Mrs. Holthurst, glanced uncertainly at the other occupant of the car.

"You teaching that young man jujitsu, or he teaching you?" asked Marjory.

Joan showed her little pearly teeth in a grimace. "Brute," she said. "I'll tell you about it afterwards." They descended to the car arm-in-arm.

When she had shaken hands with Mrs. Holthurst, she glanced again uncertainly at the driver. He held out his hand.

"You don't remember me, Miss Velvin, I see. My name is Torrington. We met one afternoon, ages and ages ago, at Manton."

"Oh, yes," said Joan. "I remember you quite well."

"Anything wrong?" asked Torrington, casually.

"No, no," she replied hurriedly, panting a little still, striving bravely to conceal her embarrassment. She turned to glance back up the slope. "My books."

"Go and get them, Cecil," commanded Marjory.

Languidly Torrington swung himself over the door on to the footboard and ascended the slope. Purney, still motionless save for his switching ash-plant, watched him with surly eyes as he collected Joan's property and returned to the car, then seated himself on the grass, obviously determined to hold his ground. At the edge of the ridge, against the sky, Velvin and Young Henery stood with hanging arms, looking down curiously. Behind them Samuel Watts trudged on doggedly with his ulcerous leg, hoping for a little time to make up one of his lost furrows.

"We'll be havin' they airypplanes here next," said Velvin.

"Ah. They be talkin' to your Joan, Martin. Touris', I s'pose."

"Ah. Lost their way, seemin'ly."

"Ah."

"Mebbe they're broke down."

"Ah. Mebbe they are."

"Tarr'ble things for breakin' down, them motor-cars."

"Ah."

"Ah."

Samuel Watts paused half-way down the field, looked

irresolutely towards them, then limped across the furrows to join them.

"Broke down, eh?" he said complacently, when he had stared exhaustively.

"Ah," said both his companions, brightly. The three men, continued to gaze, mildly hopeful of disaster. Behind them, from time to time, one of the great patient horses turned a mildly-enquiring head. A mild gratitude for this interval of repose descended upon the long, sun-bathed field.

Meanwhile the dramatic appearance of the motor-car had been explained. Torrington had heard that some rough shooting was to be rented for the coming season over that part of the downs in the neighbourhood of the White Horse known as "The Hangings" and the adjacent ground, and had resolved to drive across and inspect it. At Marjory's suggestion a visit to Overbarrow had been included in the programme.

"I should explain," she added casually, "that Cecil and I are now engaged."

Joan glanced a little shyly from her friend to her friend's fiancé, obviously in the throes of composition. Torrington shook his head.

"If you must congratulate one of us," he said, wearily, "please let it be the less unfortunate of the two."

Marjory laughed her old familiar bark.

"That, I may inform you, Joan, expresses our relations exactly. We neither of us have the faintest idea why we are engaged, how we came to be engaged, or how we can get out of it."

Mrs. Holthurst joined in her daughter's laughter, not very mirthfully, Joan thought. Marjory's ebullitions always elicited from her a pale, remote, rather dubious smile; but for an instant Joan wondered if in this particular case her friend's bluntness was entirely humorous. She examined Torrington's profile discreetly, and was acutely conscious of the sensation of mingled attraction and dislike with which

it had inspired her on the occasion of their previous meeting. He was very good-looking she decided, very smart, very manly, very healthy, very charmingly easy of manner. But . . . no . . . she did not like him. She had an uneasy feeling that Marjory and Mrs. Holthurst and she herself amused him secretly. There was no apparent reason why they should. But that, at the moment, was her impression of Mr. Torrington.

"You live quite near here, Joan?" Mrs. Holthurst was saying.

"Just round that turn. Not a quarter of a mile away."

"Do ask us to go and see it, wherever it is," said Marjory. "We're all simply pining to see Overbarrow. We always speak of you as 'Joan of Overbarrow,' you know. Cecil invented the name for you because you're just like one of What's-his-name's heroines. Get in and let's get along."

Irradiated now with smiles, expanding already into blooming, beaming happiness in the genial atmosphere that seemed to emanate from the big, rich-looking vehicle with its gleaming varnish, its glittering brasses, its French-grey upholstery, and the intricate, mysterious apparatus of its dashboard, Joan jumped into the car and seated herself blissfully on the deliciously-luxurious cushions beside Mrs. Holthurst. Marjory took the unoccupied front seat beside her fiancé, who, with wonderful calm, set the powerful machine in motion.

"Fancy," Joan said gaily, "I have never been in a motor-car before."

"Another illusion gone for ever," said Torrington over his shoulder, as he changed into second gear. It really was rather wonderful, Joan thought, that he could talk in that amusing, sarcastic way and perform those important manipulations simultaneously. They passed the dew-pond, rounded the shoulder of the ridge, and disappeared. The three watchers returned slowly towards their teams. Purney rose from

the bank and, ascending to the plantation, proceeded through it by the most direct path towards his home. Occasionally he examined a little double row of rather angry-looking red marks on the back of his left hand.

§ iv

At the first glimpse of the farm, nestling among the beeches, a spiral of sky-blue smoke wreathing tranquilly against a background of shadowed foliage, and a newly-painted farm-waggon making a note of warm colour amongst the subdued tints of weathered tiles and picturesquely-straggling timbered out-buildings, Mrs. Holthurst exclaimed rapturously. She was a bookish, imaginative woman; the sudden appearance of this sheltered, old-world house, secluded amongst its trees in its own peaceful, remote valley, had for her a little of the charm of a fairy-tale, a little of the mystery of a cape-and-sword romance, a little of the tragedy of the Wessex novels. The impression was so vivid that she strove for expression of it for some little time, unsuccessfully, in admiring incoherencies which Joan, believing them the products of amiable politeness, assisted with amiably polite smiles. Two anxieties had assailed her abruptly as the car rolled smoothly down the gentle incline towards the Lower Gate. She feared that her father, divining visitors to the farm, might take it into his head to return to the house before his accustomed time and intrude his working-clothes and his unshaven face upon them. Also she feared that, it being Friday, Amy Lidgett might have gone into Stretton to deliver supplies of eggs and butter to certain favoured households.

This latter doubt was, however, set at rest by the appearance of Amy herself, as the car approached the garden-gate, at the dining-room window. Its arrival moved her, for the first time in Joan's knowledge of her, to a visible agitation. Her arms described two excited curves in the air; she turned and fled, calling shrilly:

"Missus! Missus!"

Tribes of Leghorns and Buff Orpingtons scattered on all sides with wild clamour from the path of the car. Mrs. Velvin protruded an amazed head through the window of the spare bedroom. Henry Meade emerged from the yard at a sexagenarian gallop, stopped abruptly at sight of the clustered ladies, and withdrew as much of his person as possible behind a gate-post, over the top of which his hat and his reconnoitring eyes rose presently into view sinisterly.

"What a jolly car," said Joan, lingering by the bonnet, partly to divert attention from these unsophisticated manoeuvrings, partly to give her mother time for any necessary adjustments to her attire. "Have you taught Marjory to drive yet?"

"Marjory taught me," said Torrington. "At least, she says so."

"What are all those funny little things for?" enquired Joan, leaning in to examine the dashboard.

"Oh, just to make it a bit harder," said Torrington. He pointed to the oil-gauge. "That contains eau-de-cologne for lady passengers who faint when they hear me using bad language because I've missed my gears."

"He's only pulling your leg, Joan. It's a mania. The poor thing can't help it. Three weeks ago he didn't know a carburettor from a cart-horse, himself."

"Mr. Torrington appears highly amused at my ignorance," said Joan, with a defiant little glance at the jester. But beneath the cool, bold intentness of his stare the glance lost its defiance, fluttered, drooped. She turned away from the car hastily.

"Won't you go in, Mrs. Holthurst?" she said, obliterating Henry Meade with a menacing frown.

In the darkness of the passage Amy Lidgett lurked with the message that Mrs. Velvin would be down as soon as she could.

"Get tea," commanded Joan. "Five. As quickly as possible."

"Missus's boots . . ." Amy said dubiously. "She wants me to help her put 'em on."

"Get tea," repeated Joan peremptorily.

"Very well, Miss Joan." Amy withdrew meekly. Not even for the sake of Missus's boots was Miss Joan to be crossed in that mood.

In the drawing-room Mrs. Holthurst stood before the fire-place, looking up at the crayon portrait above the mantel-piece.

"Who is that, Joan?" she asked. "You?"

"That is one of my great-great-grandfathers," said Joan, joining her. "I am supposed to be rather like her. She was a Miss Langley . . . of Langley Hall . . . near Wotton-under-Edge. Her father was a Sir Hercules Langley. . . . A baronet, I believe."

She turned to include the other guests in the smile with which she softened this interesting but perhaps a little too historical communication. To her confusion she detected between Marjory and Torrington the exchange of a look of confederate amusement. She blushed hotly, averted her eyes self-consciously. The kind-hearted Marjory came to her rescue.

"Joan is the most awful little snob, Cecil," she said, entwining a playfully-affectionate arm about her waist. "We used to have the most bloodthirsty rows about her great-great-grandmother at St. Angela's. Joan used to resurrect her at least once every week-day and twice on Sundays. Didn't you, Old Cockolorum?"

"I suppose everybody takes an interest in their own ancestors," said Joan, a little frigidly.

"I don't," said Marjory. "And I'm sure that you don't, Cecil, do you? One of your grandfathers was a brewery and the other was a distillery . . ."

"Ah, yes," smiled Torrington. "But the father of one

of my grandmothers was very nearly being a Lord Mayor. Don't forget that. Unfortunately he died . . . of delirium tremens, I understand . . . just before the election. Otherwise I should certainly have been extremely proud of him."

"What nonsense you young people talk," said Mrs. Holthurst, with her pale, remote smile. "You must sing for us, Joan, before we go. I have always felt sure you could sing if you tried to."

"Oh, I squawk feebly," said Joan. "I know Marjory will make fun of my poor little attempts."

"I shall if they're funny," said Marjory promptly.

Mrs. Velvin's entry interrupted the somewhat constrained silence which followed this remark.

"This is Mrs. Holthurst, Mother," said Joan.

Mrs. Velvin, very red and breathless, shook hands spasmodically. As Amy Lidgett had deserted her, and as she had been unable to persuade herself that any shoes or slippers which she possessed were worthy of such distinguished guests, she had embarked alone upon the desperate enterprise of putting on her boots. No eyes save her own had witnessed that heroic, indecorous struggle, which had terminated on the floor of the bedroom; but its titanic agonies still shook her enormous person from her highest hairpin to her painfully-compressed big toe.

"My daughter has spoken to me of you so often," she gasped. "You have been so kind to her . . . you and your daughter."

"This is Miss Holthurst," said Joan, blushed again and corrected herself hurriedly. "Marjory."

Marjory shook hands in her mannish way.

"Pleased to meet you, miss," said Mrs. Velvin. "Won't you sit down. Lovely weather we're having now." She wiped her face hastily with a still stiffly-folded handkerchief. "You must excuse me being so hot. I feel it so when the hot weather comes in first . . . being so stout."

"This is Mr. Torrington, Mother," said Joan, through set teeth.

"How d'you do, Mrs. Velvin," said Torrington, charmingly. "I'm sure you wonder at this invasion of ours. I am really the person who is responsible for it." He slid a chair behind her dexterously, and she thanked him with a motherly smile as she deposited herself in it, although it was a short-legged chair upon which she had not sat for over twenty years. "What a charming place you live in. . . . But what a most deplorable road you get to it by."

"Ah, well, you see," said Mrs. Velvin, visibly captivated by his good-looks and his attentiveness, "we've never expected to have a motor-car come along it. When I saw you coming I thought it must be Lord Frome, at first, or his agent, Mr. Buckmaster . . . perhaps you know him? . . . a very nice gentleman."

Mr. Torrington knew Mr. Buckmaster very well. He considered that Mrs. Velvin's opinion of him was in every way deserved. His air conveyed that he felt it extremely important that his friend Mr. Buckmaster should deserve Mrs. Velvin's good opinion.

"Lord Frome owns most of this part of Wiltshire, doesn't he, Mrs. Velvin?" put in Mrs. Holthurst. The conversation led easily from landlords to acquirable shooting. Mrs. Velvin forgot her nervousness, ceased to perspire visibly, and produced some helpful information with reference to the two farmers who divided between them the tenancy of "The Hangings." To emphasise a little pleasantry she laid a motherly hand on Mr. Torrington's knee and patted it playfully. Joan's ruffled susceptibilities soothed themselves gradually beneath Mrs. Holthurst's gentle, dexterous small-talk; when presently Marjory carried her off on a voyage of exploration she had quite forgiven that intercepted slight to her ancestors.

As she surveyed Joan's more treasured possessions in her bedroom, Marjory gave her an impressionistic résumé of

the family history since her latest letter. The Gunner had gone to Connemara for a fortnight's dapping. Victor's battalion was under orders for Malta. Harold was to be called at the end of the coming Michaelmas term. Harold, it appeared, saw a good deal of the Warrenders now. They had left Bristol and gone to live in Kensington. Marjory suspected a *tendresse* on his part for Phyllis Warrender.

"She has improved very much," she explained, ". . . except her nose."

They drifted to memories of St. Angela's. Muriel Wright was married and in India. Madge Britton was engaged to a parson in Devonshire. Florrie Cole was dead. Her sister, Emily, with the double-jointed thumbs, was studying Art in Paris. Forgotten names were recalled, forgotten adventures revived. St. Angela's was not a bad old place, Marjory admitted. They wondered who had Number 19 now.

"What was happening when we came along?" asked Marjory. "You promised to tell me."

She listened to Joan's expurgated version of the incident by the plantation with indignation.

"What cheek! If I had known I should have asked Cecil to say a few kindly, warning words to him."

"I am very glad you didn't. I should not like Mr. Torington to be drawn into any unpleasantness on my account."

"You funny, stiff old thing," laughed Marjory. "You still talk just like Miss Mordaunt. You don't like Cecil?"

Joan coloured faintly.

"Of course I like him," she protested. "I . . . I think he is rather conceited."

"Yes. He strikes most people that way, at first. But he's rather a dear, really. Of course I've known him practically all my life. It has always been sort of understood between us that we should marry one another eventually. I think he's rather fond of me. We're both very keen about sport and horses and things of that sort, you see.

"Mother doesn't quite approve of our engagement," she continued, after a pause. "I don't know whether you've noticed it or not. . . . But such is the sad fact."

"Why?" asked Joan simply.

"Oh, she thinks that Cecil is too young to marry . . . or too young to marry me . . . or something like that. Mother's funny, you know. Of course he is rather young, I suppose. Still . . . he's four years older than I am. Mother thinks, too, that he's too young to settle down to do nothing for the rest of his life. And the Old Gunner, of course, thinks I ought to marry a soldier."

"Oh," said Joan, finding nothing else to say to these somewhat disilluisioning revelations.

"So that," said Marjory, "if Cecil didn't happen to have about fifteen thousand a year, I expect there would have been hullabalos when I announced our engagement to them."

"Fifteen thousand . . . a *year*?" whispered Joan, awestruck.

"You know where it comes from, don't you?" said Marjory, seizing the opportunity to powder her nose before Joan's mirror. "Torrington's Ales."

Torrington's Ales had been familiar to Joan from her earliest youth from the fact that every hotel and inn and public-house that she had ever set eyes on up to that point in her career had announced, by a placard without, their sale within. They were, indeed, a household word from Hampshire to Devon and had made large fortunes for many generations of Torringtons. But she had never until then connected those familiar black-and-gold placards with Marjory's Mr. Torrington.

"Doesn't he do anything, then?" she asked.

"Not a durn tap," said Marjory. "He's a junior partner. But his uncle, James Torrington, really manages the business. Cecil doesn't worry him much. His father died last year, you know. So that he is his own master." She

considered her nose detachedly. "I'm jolly lucky, really. I'm an ugly-looking brute, when all is said and done. You haven't seen his place, have you? Shalcott? It's rather a topping place. Don't know what we're going to do with his stepmother and his stepbrother and sister, though. Mrs. Torrington and I don't hit it off. She's a little cat. She's got to move out of Shalcott before I move in. That's certain."

If Marjory had been able to look into the thoughts that were flitting busily to and fro behind the innocent, gravely-smiling grey eyes that regarded her while she unburdened herself of these confidences, they might perhaps have been a little less unguarded. For a new view of Marjory had presented itself to Joan as she listened to them. She saw Marjory now, no longer as a blunt, frank, jolly tomboy, but as a rather plain but extremely shrewd and determined young woman who had made up her mind to capture fifteen thousand a year, and who, ignoring all other considerations, had, somehow or other but at all events, she divined, ruthlessly, effected her object. Her eyes wandered over her friend's wiry brown hair, her straggling eyebrows, her slightly prominent eyes, her rather snub nose, her decidedly too large mouth, her much too fleshy chin and throat. Making all allowance for her undeniable charm of manner and the pleasant candour of her eyes, Marjory was, beyond all doubt, by comparison with Joan herself, quite a plain-looking girl. And yet fifteen thousand a year was willing to marry her. "Jolly lucky" appeared to Joan somewhat inadequate appreciation of her good fortune.

There was hardly a tinge of envy, not the faintest shadow of disapproval in this revised estimate of her dearest friend. But her own determination to escape from Overbarrow into a world of marriageable males became from that moment a cold, inflexible passion. While Marjory proceeded unenthusiastically with her fiancé's step-relatives, Joan resolved that at the cost of any weariness or expense she would begin

forthwith to have lessons in shorthand and typewriting. With a pang of regretful impatience she reflected that if, instead of silly dreamings over useless novels, she had had the energy to make a start six months before, she might now have been a typist . . . say, in the office of a brewery whose junior partner had fifteen thousand a year and . . .

"I mean to take up shorthand and typewriting this summer," she said abruptly. "I'm sick of this place. I'm sick of doing nothing. There's rather a good school in Bath."

"What's the idea?" asked Marjory. "Want to be independent?"

"I feel buried alive here," said Joan. "There's nothing to do . . . nothing to see . . . no one to know. It had begun to get on my nerves lately. I'd rather work all day in an office in Bristol . . . even if I had to live by myself in lodgings. . . ."

"I suppose it is pretty dull here," said Marjory. "Still . . . it's pretty dull everywhere. You'd hate being in an office. It's jolly hard work . . . bad pay . . . and Bristol's a deadly hole, really.

"If I were you, Joan," she went on, after a moment, wisely, "I shouldn't waste my time on any side-shows of that sort. What you want is a nice, sensible husband. I should have thought that by this time you would have selected one. Or are all the young men about here so very unattractive . . . or so very coy? What about that Mr. Clements you used to speak of in your letters? He sounded quite interesting."

"He has gone away to Cornwall," said Joan evasively.

"Permanently?"

"Until August, I believe."

Joan wandered to the dressing-table, secured her combs more firmly, and, glancing by accident over the top of the mirror, uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"What?" enquired Marjory.

"Gracious!" said Joan. "There he is."

"Who?"

"Mr. Clements."

Through the Lower Gate a small, very high wagonette with immense spidery wheels, drawn by an ancient horse, was advancing towards the house. Behind the elderly driver, in a new, light-grey suit and a coquettish Homburg, sat Mr. Clements. On the seat opposite to him lay a pair of crutches; against it reposed two large suit-cases. He was gazing eagerly towards the very window at which the two girls stood. Hastily Joan withdrew into the shade of the curtains, blushing brightly.

"Gracious!" she said again, and laughed foolishly.

"You fibber!" said Marjory, turning on her reproachfully.

"Oh, you shocking fibber, Joan!"

The elderly driver, employing his hand as an ear-trumpet, received from his passenger prolonged instructions, descended from his seat, and came up the garden path to the door.

"He's not in his first youth, your Mr. Clements," said Marjory. "But he looks rather amiable."

Through the open window rose an enquiry as to whether Miss Velvin was at home, and Amy Lidgett's affirmative response. The elderly man returned to the wagonette with his report and Mr. Clements proceeded, with his assistance, to descend cautiously to earth. There was a knock at the bedroom door.

"Mr. Clements wants to see you, Miss Joan," said Amy Lidgett's voice mysteriously.

"All right. I am going down. Ask Mr. Clements to come in. Lay another place."

"This is quite thrilling," said Marjory. "Will he expect us to talk about his plays? None of us knows anything about them."

"Oh, he's not a bit like that," said Joan a little stiffly. "I think it's most awfully plucky of him to get in and out of that high trap with a broken leg. Poor fellow."

From behind her curtain she followed with solicitous tenderness Mr. Clements's amazingly rapid progress from the wagonette to the garden gate. "Oh!" she exclaimed apprehensively, when he hopped up to the higher level of the path. "How clever he is on his crutches."

She surveyed herself hurriedly in the mirror. The sunlight glinted on her silky golden hair; her eyes were a sparkle; in her cheeks was the faint, sweet flush of a new-blown wild-rose.

"Well . . . shall we go down?" she said, smiling shyly beneath her friend's approving scrutiny.

"What is it?" asked Marjory. "A flirtation . . . or the genuine business?"

"I don't know," said Joan, tripping laughingly from the room.

But in her heart she said: "He has come back on his crutches. It is the genuine business."

§ v

Mr. Clements insisted gallantly on rising from the ottoman to greet Joan on her appearance in the drawing-room and to be introduced to Marjory. At close quarters he looked pale and thin and heavy-eyed. His leg was recovering strength rapidly; but his insomnia continued troublesome. On the whole he had been rather disappointed with Cornwall.

Having inspected the new arrival's trousers carefully and having discovered that their wearer had been at Sherborne and Cambridge, Torrington brightened visibly. It transpired that Mr. Clements and he had met previously, visually, in the hunting-field, and that they possessed several mutual acquaintances in the neighbourhood of Trowbridge. A buzz of cheerful conversation filled the dark, low-ceilinged room with a gaiety that to Joan, for whom it had grown to seem the most melancholy and deserted room in the world, was at once amazing and delightful. Mr. Clements gave a quietly

humorous account of his accident and his subsequent adventures in the wheelbarrow. His tired eyes returned always to Joan's face, eagerly. Something in their look led her to believe that he was being amusing for the benefit of these strangers merely because they were her friends, and that his real wish and purpose was to speak to her alone. And in fact their presence at Overbarrow on that particular afternoon had disconcerted him seriously, and he wished them most heartily and sincerely to the devil—though the motives of this unsociable desire were not so simple or so flattering as Joan supposed them.

Mrs. Holthurst having expressed much eagerness to inspect an oak linen-chest of great antiquity of which Mrs. Velvin was extremely proud, Joan found herself presently sitting in isolation on the piano-stool, separated from the three other occupants of the room by its entire length. She swung round on the seat, selected that sad little song of Lord Henry Somerset's which she had sung to Mr. Clements on the occasion of his second visit to Overbarrow, struck some experimental chords, and began to sing. She became aware that Torrington had crossed the room and was standing behind her. Reaching the bottom of the second page, she raised her eyes to his with a smile. He turned the page dexterously, and as he did so his arm touched hers lightly.

It was the slightest thing—an instant's contact of his tweed sleeve with her linen sleeve, a mere brushing of prosaic materials. But for Joan it had the quality of an overwhelming, possessive caress. A little shiver crept from the feathery curls at the nape of her neck to her brain. She became acutely conscious of the spot just above her elbow where her skin had felt that momentary pressure. Her voice continued on its sweet, sad way, truly and steadily, ended on a pathetic third.

"I'm awfully fond of that thing," said Torrington.

"It is rather a pretty song," replied Joan.

She raised her eyes again to his; but this time neither pair smiled.

"Sing something else," commanded Marjory from the ottoman. "Something more cheerful, if possible."

She sang again. And again, as he turned the page, Torrington's arm rested lightly against hers for an instant. She knew; there could be no doubt of it. He wanted to touch her; he had meant to touch her; he had touched her. When the song ended they exchanged another serious, profoundly questioning look.

"Thanks awfully," he said lightly, and began to turn over the music on the top of the piano. "Like to hear me sing? Nothing here I know, I'm afraid. I'll sing you 'Myrrha.' Know the accompaniment?"

No."

"Come and do the rum-ti-tum for me, Marjory," he said over his shoulder. He could not care for her, really, Joan thought, if he spoke to her like that.

He sang three songs, very beautifully, with great expression and without effort, in a fine and carefully-trained tenor. The emotional artistry of the performance impressed Joan deeply by its contrast with the deliberate indifferent non-chalance of his habitual manner. She listened dreamily, her eyes following Marjory's fingers as they moved over the keys, her chin poised on her joined hands. Amy Lidgett entered with an immensely-laden tray, arranged its contents upon the table mechanically, and went out. Joan perceived neither her entrance nor her exit.

Towards the ending of the last song her eyes rose from the piano to the singer's face, met his above Marjory's brown mop.

"Songs like sounds that 'mid strings stray
Fill this breast of mine.
Smiling round my lips they play,
In my eyes they shine."

Something in Joan reeled blindly and dizzily. She had

the sensation of being caught up by a great wind and swept away, away from herself, away from the drawing-room, away from the earth, away from everything . . . out . . . out . . . out. Her eyes swam. She desired violently to cry.

"Too many cigarettes," said Torrington's voice across infinite space. "My throat's like a rusty hinge."

Mr. Clements, stranded remotely on the ottoman, produced a not very cordial smile.

"Delightful," he said. "Delightful. Pray continue."

Mrs. Velvin and Mrs. Holthurst returning, however, at this point, followed by Amy Lidgett with the tea-kettle, the piano was abandoned for more practical affairs. Torrington proffered an arm genially.

"I can manage all right, thank you," said Mr. Clements coldly.

§ vi

"Do take care, Mr. Clements," said Joan earnestly. "I shall put you here. I know you don't mind an open window behind you. And the table-legs won't be in your way here."

A wan smile lighted up Mr. Clements's somewhat dejected countenance. Agilely he hopped to the chair which she had indicated, seated himself, and swung his legs into safety beneath the table.

"I never saw any one so nimble with all their limbs," said Mrs. Velvin admiringly. Every one exclaimed at Mr. Clements' address.

"Well, Miss Velvin," enquired the acrobat, "how many novels have you devoured since our last meeting?"

"Oh, dozens and dozens," said Joan gaily, seating herself beside him. They plunged for a little time into literature while Mrs. Velvin described to Mrs. Holthurst in detail the manufacture of the scones.

"Think you've decided to take the shooting, Cecil?" asked Marjory. "I should love some of that very delicious-looking honey if you don't propose to eat it all."

Torrington passed the honey. "What?" he asked ab-

stractedly. "Take the shoot? Oh, yes . . . I shall take it. How far do you make it from Bradford to Stretton, Miss Velvin?"

"About twelve miles, I think," said Joan, and returned to Mr. Clements. "When did you come back from Cornwall?"

"This afternoon."

"But you were to have been away until August . . . I heard."

She laid a faint emphasis on the "heard." Mr. Clements reconnoitred the table, and perceived that every one else was conversationally busy.

"I had to come back," he said with vague significance. "I began several letters to you, but . . . well . . . I just didn't send them. . . ."

"How is your sister?" asked Joan, with a disappointing incuriosity as to those undespached epistles. "Quite well, I hope?"

"Oh, quite, thanks. She had to go into Trowbridge this afternoon . . . otherwise I should have brought her up to see you. She commandeered the trap, so that I had to charter old Perrin's wagonette." He buttered a scone thoughtfully. "Yes," he said. "I had to come back."

"You got any shooting, Clements?" asked Torrington.

"No. I rather think of taking a shoot next season, though. There are a couple of hundred acres or so just near my house that I've got my eye on. I missed them last year, but . . ."

"The Hangings'?" asked Joan quickly.

"Yes," said Mr. Clements. "I believe there are several other people who have their respective eyes on it, too. But I rather fancy that I've got the inside track now with the farmers."

Joan looked across at Torrington. Torrington looked across at her. Neither moved a muscle.

"Why, that's the very shooting that . . ." began Mrs. Velvin.

"Do give Mrs. Holthurst some tea, Mother," said Joan hurriedly.

"Oh, excuse me," said Mrs. Velvin, forgetting "The Hangings" in hospitable anxieties.

"I suppose you had a great deal of pain in your leg?" cooed Joan. "You had it in a plaster cast, hadn't you? How dreadful it must have been not to be able to move it."

Mr. Clements smiled a smile of reminiscent stoicism.

"It is wonderful what one can adapt oneself to," he said. "The first time I tried to stand on one leg, without crutches . . ."

Joan listened to him with kindly, attentive eyes and a determination to be interested in fractured fibulas and tibias. Already she reproached herself uneasily for her silence in reference to Torrington's intention to secure "The Hangings." That he, and not Mr. Clements, would secure them she felt no doubt. She had read in his face the determination to secure them forthwith and at all costs. Why had she allied herself to this determination by that treacherous silence? Why had she checked her mother on the point of revelation? Why had she looked across the table at Torrington and exchanged with him that look that had made her his accomplice? Why, even now, did she not say, "But, Mr. Torrington, 'The Hangings' is the shooting which you want to rent?" Why not leave them to decide the issue between them? What could be simpler?

"A considerable amount of œdema persists still," said Mr. Clements. "I suppose that it will be some months before local conditions return to absolute normal."

"I suppose so," said Joan sympathetically. "You are eating nothing."

After all, she had done nothing. The thing was no affair of hers. She had not really interfered in it. There was no obligation to Mr. Clements, no treachery. Perhaps, after all, he would secure the shooting. He was on the spot; he knew the farmers.

"I lie awake at night, hour after hour," said Mr. Clements, "thinking the same old thoughts over and over, tossing from side to side, wondering if daylight will ever come. . . ."

"Poor you!" she murmured softly, and flashed a little tender glance at him to make up for any unkindness she might have been guilty of.

"Ah . . . if you knew how weary I've grown of my thoughts during the last four weeks . . ." said Mr. Clements, encouraged by the glance to a pathetic undertone. . . .

§ vii

"I have enjoyed my visit to Overbarrow so much," said Mrs. Holthurst as she went down the garden path with Joan, leaving Mrs. Velvin to entertain the remaining guest. "Though I shall dream of that linen-chest of your mother's with the bitterest envy. Now . . . when will you come to us, Joan? We shall always be delighted to see you. When will you come?"

"It's awfully kind of you, Mrs. Holthurst," said Joan gratefully. "You know how I love going to Manton." Her eyes were misted with affection. The visit was closing in triumphant success.

"Next week?"

"Well . . . the week after . . . if that doesn't interfere with your plans?"

"We shall be at Manton until the end of July. The week after, then. Harold will probably be at home then . . . perhaps Victor, too . . . if he gets leave before he sails. They will be delighted to see you again."

Marjory stood at the gate, watching Torrington's manoeuvring of the car, which was now backing slowly towards her, its bonnet pointing towards the Lower Gate. The elderly driver of the wagonette and his elderly horse were watching its movements non-committally.

"How ripping," she said, on hearing of Joan's intended visit, and squeezed her warmly as they kissed, before she

followed her mother into the car. When he had arranged their rugs and pillows carefully, Torrington proceeded to the radiator, unscrewed the cap, and examined his water-supply.

"Must fill up," he said solemnly. "I wonder if your hospitality will include a bucket of water, Miss Velvin."

"Of course," said Joan. "There is a pump in the yard. I'm sure we can find you a bucket."

She led the way into the yard, a little in advance of him, found a bucket, hung it on the pump, and moved a little away while he lighted a cigarette.

"Now . . . about this shooting, Miss Velvin," he said, stooping to the pump-handle, "I suppose . . . er . . . I suppose Clements is rather an intimate friend of yours?"

"Oh, no," said Joan quickly. "He is just an ordinary friend, that's all."

"I see. Well . . . do you think that he's very keen about getting that shoot?"

Joan had repented of the quickness of her disclaimer. "I really don't know," she said coolly. "I suppose he is just as keen as you are."

"I want that shoot," said Torrington, examining his cigarette thoughtfully. "I want it badly. And I'm afraid I must have it. As a matter of fact, I intend to fix up about it, definitely, on my way back through Stretton."

Joan offered no comment. He filled the bucket, straightened himself, and moved to where she stood.

"If he likes, Clements can come in as a fourth gun, any time."

Still Joan remained silent.

"It would be rather jolly if you asked us to come along to Overbarrow occasionally."

"I shall probably not be at Overbarrow this winter" said Joan. "But I am sure Mother will be delighted to see you and your friends at any time."

"Oh," said Torrington. He lowered the bucket to the ground. "Where will you be this winter, then?"

"Heaven knows," laughed Joan nervously. "But I hope not here, at all events."

"Oh," said Torrington again, and began to kick the bucket gently and delicately with a calculating toe. "Still . . . I shall take the shoot," he said finally. He picked up the bucket and they returned in silence to the car.

Henry Meade's hat emerged from the door of the cow-house by instalments, followed by his head. When they had disappeared round the angle of the house he remained staring cautiously at the spot where he had last seen them. The filling of the bucket had led him for some moments to hope that the motor-car had caught fire, as those unnatural and unreasonable things were prone, in his belief, to do at any moment. His mind revolved now tranquilly the other possible applications of buckets of water to those unfamiliar and unfriendly engines.

§ viii

From the garden gate Joan watched the car's smooth retreat. It was half-past five. Within the encircling ring of beeches the enclosure of the farmstead was in sombre shadow, though beyond lay still bright sunshine. She saw, through the trunks of the trees by the Lower Gate, the car emerge into this exterior brilliance gaily, its brasses sparkling, a little wisp of blue smoke trailing behind. The foliage hid all further view of it; but she remained until the hum of the engine died away in the valley in which she had first heard it, and only the melancholy crooning of the wood-pigeons disturbed the silence. Then she picked up the empty bucket and walked meditatively towards the yard.

She felt that events of the greatest importance and significance for her had happened in the preceding hour. It seemed as if the spell that chained her to Overbarrow had been broken; that deliverance had come to her. She perceived suddenly, acutely, the truth of wisdom. "Everything comes to him who waits" . . . "The darkest hour comes be

fore the dawn."—the two old proverbs sang exultantly in her heart, all but framed themselves on her lips. She glowed with the self-righteousness of the patient one whose faith in ultimate reward has never faltered.

Some new gloves would be necessary for her visit to Manton; to-morrow she would go into Westbridge and get them. She also needed a new hat. But this she would purchase with Marjory's assistance in Bath.

What a good, dear old thing Marjory was.

And He . . . what a dear . . . what a gentle, masterful, handsome, wilful, splendid and utterly perfectly dear. . . ."

She wanted to think. She wanted to think about Him. She wanted to think about the real meaning of every word he had said to her, every glance he had turned towards her, every smile that had puzzled her, explained to her, questioned her. She wanted to steep herself in the delicious recollection of them all. It seemed to her now that until she thought about these things and picked them to pieces and built them up again and made herself mistress of their utmost meaning, their quality, their promise, nothing else would be of the least interest or importance. She passed through the gateway with eyes bent to earth in the absorption of a prayer-nun, her bucket trailing.

But, in place of that clear, satisfying thought which she strove for, a jumble of disconnected impressions, snatches of phrases, and quite irrelevant distractions entangled themselves in formless medley about the one definite and nuclear fact that she was to go to Manton the week after next. From a vision of the tennis-courts her mind flashed to her first meeting with Torrington, fluttered to Mrs. Holthurst's jealousy of her mother's linen-press, returned to Torrington's determination to secure "The Hangings." As she halted by the pump she heard, distinctly, his voice say again: "I want that shoot. I want it badly. And I'm afraid I must have it." She laid down the bucket and stood for a moment,

smiling, before she touched caressingly the spot where his hand had rested on the pump-handle.

"I zee the gen'lman drawin' water, Miz Joan," said Henry Meade from the cowhouse door. "Zays I, I'll go an' draw'n for 'e. Then zays I, mebbe Miz Joan won' laike I caddlin' abow. Zo, zays I, I'll bide where I be, zee. An' zo I done. An' I don' know as I done raight, zee."

"It's all right, Henry," said Joan. "We managed without you." She desired to kiss Henry Meade for having been disturbed by such solicitude on account of Him.

"Zo I zee," laughed the old man cheerfully. "Zo I zee. A fine-lookin' young man 'e be in a slander way. An' draives 'is machine as if'n were nuthin', layin back an' smokin' with one hand. Aye do 'e. I waz watchin' 'e."

"I want that shoot. I want it badly," sang a voice in Joan's ears. She turned and entered the house by the kitchen.

"I hope as they 'joyed thayre tea, miss?" said Amy anxiously, from the scullery sink.

"Very much, Amy," said Joan. "You had everything very nice. And so quickly, too."

"That young gen'lman sings somethin' lovely, miss," said the gratified Amy. "I never heard better not in Salisbury 'thedral."

Joan went slowly along the dark passage, past the big old faithful clock. Against its sonorous tick she heard a voice say: "I want that shoot. I want it badly." She was smiling when she opened the drawing-room door and beheld Mr. Clements's pale face turned eagerly to her coming. For nearly ten minutes she had forgotten his very existence.

CHAPTER VII

§ i

FOR a fortnight Mr. Clements had gazed upon the long Bude rollers and upon his fellow-guests at the hotel with gloomy disapproval. There was nothing else to see at Bude; nothing else, for him, to do. Some one had once told Mrs. Clements that Bude was a charming, bracing spot, and she had induced the surgeon who had taken charge of her son's leg to recommend him to go there to be braced and charmed. At the end of a fortnight the invalid had lost nearly a stone in weight, all traces of appetite, all ability to sleep, and all save the thinnest veneer of the civility which usage expects of the civilised man. The rollers rolled superbly; every one under the roof of the hotel was untiringly sympathetic; the manager and all his staff exhausted themselves in the devising of means for his greater comfort. In vain. Mr. Clements refused to eat, refused to sleep, refused to talk, refused to be braced and charmed in any way. His cheeks paled and hollowed, his eyelids grew purplish and puffy, a permanent crease bisected deeply the dignified expanse of his forehead. As he did not read, did not write letters, and could not take walks, he sat for the greater part of the fortnight alone and unoccupied on the verandah of the hotel. Sometimes he blinked at the rollers, sometimes at his horizontal leg, sometimes at the gravel of the drive. But almost invariably his eyes closed and turned themselves inward to the worm that gnawed relentlessly at an organ of whose existence he had been until a few weeks previously altogether sceptical. For Mr. Clements's real trouble was not a broken leg but a lacerated and highly-inflamed heart.

He was, indeed, and knew unhappily that he was, for the

first time in his life, with all his senses, with all his capacities for emotion, with all of him save a cold, indissoluble sediment of common-sense, in love. And he had not the faintest notion in the world as to what he really wished or really intended to do about it.

There had been in his thirty-seven respectable years sundry glimpses of romance, glimpses of passion, glimpses of a plane of living where all was beauty and fine recklessness and self-effacing adoration, to stately music, in a solemn landscape; glimpses that had lingered long enough to inform him—artistically—with the amiable sentimentality that had won him some quite considerable success as a playwright. But at the conclusion of each of these brief incidents his life had always remained tranquil, prosaic, prosperous. Some of them he smiled at still; some of them he still regretted; most of them he had completely forgotten. He was an indolent man and, in reference to women, a timid one. The difficulties and embarrassments of respectable philandery had repelled him no less than those of furtive viciousness. In his mid-twenties he had resigned himself quite placidly to the part of the gently-cynical looker-on at the greatly over-rated game of love.

He had terminated an academic career of some distinction by obtaining a high place in the Higher Civil, and for some ten years had done nothing in particular in a very gentlemanly and decently-remunerated way in an office in Whitehall. He had dabbled a little in literature—short stories of the drab hue that was fashionable in the middle nineties and occasional outbursts into lyric verse—when the idea of writing a play occurred to him one afternoon on the top of a Hampstead-bound 'bus. It was accepted at sight by a newly-installed actress-manager, produced after a delay of two years, ran for six months, and induced him to write another which ran for just six nights. A cotton-spinning and childless uncle dying just then conveniently and leaving him the bulk of a respectable fortune, he had retired from officialdom

into professional literariness, and eventually, in a minor way, into country-gentlemanship. He continued to write plays, without inspiration or conviction but with increasing technical skill and respect for the box-office. To his family, of whom he saw as little as possible, he fulfilled the duties of son and brother by a financial generosity which made the continuance of his celibacy a matter of the gravest importance. As he had never displayed the least predisposition towards matrimony, their anxiety on this head had, however, never intruded itself ungracefully. If ever a man had seemed designed by his own inclinations and those of Providence for confirmed bachelordom, Mr. Clements, until the third month of his thirty-eighth year, had seemed to be that man.

And then, in a country lane, as he strolled all unsuspecting in the sunshine, smoking his post-prandial pipe, Fate had taken him by the scruff of his middle-aged neck, shaken him, turned him upside-down and inside-out, and tossed him into the Utterly Impossible and Absurd. The blood that had meandered so tepidly and peacefully in Mr. Clements's veins for all those years became suddenly a boiling, frothing torrent; the passions which had hidden their shamed faces in the dark places of his brain surged clamorously forth to the assault of his soul; the joys of heaven and the agonies of hell jiggled him and jostled him and jerked him to and fro in a frantic, unseemly tug-of-war over the abysses of the unknown. Head-over-heels, most blissfully and most miserably Mr. Clements fell in love.

The enforced inactivity of the weeks which had followed his accident had been the prison wall behind which he had lived through the first great unhappiness of his life. While his physical separation from Joan had fanned to fever-heat his craving—which he sincerely believed to be permanent and incapable of change—to possess himself for eternity of the image of her which haunted the thoughts of his dragging days and sleepless nights, he had realised with passionate regret—
for he was a man of fastidious honesty in his dealings with

his conscience—that he neither desired nor intended to marry her. The disadvantages of matrimony—with any one—as compared with the tranquil irresponsibility of his bachelor life appeared to him enormous. He was well aware of his own limited powers of patience and sociability, of his extensive and now probably incurable selfishness, and of the formidable opposition which his mother and his sisters would offer to the introduction of a monopolising and perhaps estranging wife. It appeared to him that these disadvantages would be overwhelmingly increased by the selection of a wife who did not bring with her the prestige of a social status at least equal to his own. Like most people who pride themselves on their disdain of conventionality, he was, at bottom, the abject worshipper of the idols at which he scoffed. Joan—sweet, delicious, tempting Joan, with her dear slimness and her dear grey eyes, was, for all his friends, for all his acquaintances to smile at and shrug at, for all his relatives to sneer at, the daughter of a farmer. Despite her reminiscences of St. Angela's, despite her friends the Holthursts, despite her intelligence, her natural graciousness and goodness and gladness, not that unmistakable thing . . . a gentle woman. With every ounce and inch of him did Mr. Clements hate and despise himself for seeing that most damnable fact. But there it was. Day after day, night after night, it stared him in the face, leering mockingly at his dismay. Sometimes he blasphemed aloud at it. "Oh, *blast* it!" he would snarl. "Curse it and blast it!" His voice would rise to a whimper. "Oh, *curse* it!" he would whine, and fall to staring at the hideous corpulence of his plaster-enshrouded leg.

If he did not want to marry her, then what did he want of her?

He endeavoured to look himself firmly in the eye as he asked himself that question. He endeavoured to assure himself that it was quite possible for a man of introspective habit to be quite certain that his intentions with regard to a particular person of the opposite sex were entirely honourable

and pure and above reproach, and at the same time to contemplate, theoretically, the probable or at all events possible consequences of their being nothing of the kind. He told himself that his respect for Joan, his desire for her happiness, and his incapacity to injure her in any slightest way were beyond the suspicion of a doubt. But . . . if he loved her . . . how did he love her? As he loved the uncapturable beauty of one of his Caroline Testouts, or the morning rapture of the birds in Spring, or the black-and-silver of full moonlight? Did he really ask no more than to look at her and listen to her until she faded and grew silent? "Yes," said Mr. Clements, still endeavouring to look himself firmly in the eye, and not to see the leer of the seducer. "Why not?" demanded Mr. Clements. "Why should not I, a respectable, honourable man, walk and talk and even jest a little with this beautiful and rather forlorn maiden of lowly degree, and look upon her fairness with the detachment of an artist, the chivalry of a gentleman, and the trusty candour of a friend? Why not?"

"Folly," said Mr. Clements's other self. "It never has been so. It never will be so. If you are really a respectable, honourable man you will leave this girl alone. If you are not, don't be a hypocrite."

"I am not a hypocrite," cried Mr. Clements to himself, warmly. "I admit that I adore her, that I long for her; that the thought of her burns me and tortures me; that roses and the song of birds and moonshine have nothing whatever to do with my feelings in regard to her. I admit that I am just an ordinary man, and that I am quite capable, if the opportunity of doing so safely occurred, of throwing off my garments of honourable respectability and behaving with the most primitive impropriety. But I am sure," said Mr. Clements, "that my powers of self-control, of will, and of intellect are strong enough to prevent any such unpleasant demonstrations. Such as I am," said Mr. Clements, "I am master of myself. If I wish to go to her, I will go to her

. . . with perfect impunity. If I desire to stay away from her, I will stay away from her with the most unrelenting inflexibility. But I am not a hypocrite. I . . . I am almost certain I am not a hypocrite."

On the night of his second Thursday at Bude he announced his intention of returning to Stretton by the first train next morning. At Westbridge, his mother, who was returning directly to Hampstead, took leave of him anxiously. His feverish restlessness during the journey had aroused her gravest apprehensions. She implored of him that on his arrival at Hazelhatch, he would drink a glass of hot milk and swallow an aspirin tabloid.

"You are so precious, Arthur darling," she said, endeavouring to ascertain the temperature of his forehead with a maternal hand.

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Clements impatiently, dodging her as he had been accustomed to dodge her thirty years before. "Get me a porter."

Outside the station he found waiting for him the elderly charioteer of Stretton's unique public conveyance, with a note from his sister.

"Did not expect you. Nothing in house. Have gone into Trowbridge. Am sending Perrin to meet you. Back tea-time."

For the first time for a fortnight a smile illumined Mr. Clements's haggard visage.

"Do you know where Overbarrow is?" he enquired of Mr. Perrin, when he had climbed into the wagonette. The old man jerked his whip towards the green ramparts of the Plain that rose to southwards over the straggling roofs of the town. "Right," said Mr. Clements. "Get there as quickly as you can."

Such were the flutterings that had led the moth back to the candle—not very graceful, obviously unwise, but for the moment altogether beyond the moth's control.

§ ii

Τὴν δε μάλιστα γαμεῖν ἥτις σεθεν ἔγγυθι ναίει exhorts the Works and Days: "Above all be careful to marry a woman of your own people." At odd intervals during those pensive weeks the old tag had drifted into Mr. Clements's perturbed thoughts warningly. He might have recalled, as he sat with Mrs. Velvin, waiting impatiently for Joan's return, another equally apposite quotation from the same once-familiar source.

For to his other anguishes had now been added that of a blind, unreasoning jealousy. He had learned of Torrington's engagement to Joan's friend from Joan's mother, but the information, so far from allaying his suspicions, had had the effect of sharpening them to a point of excruciating torture. In other respects an unobservant and incurious man, he was afflicted by an abnormal consciousness of and interest in the unspoken thoughts and impressions of people about him, and the unintentional revelations of voice and expression and gesture. His emotional uneasiness in regard to Joan had concentrated this special alertness intensely upon her and upon all the approaches to her. He had not deliberately watched Torrington; indeed, he had deliberately refrained from doing so. But he had been acutely aware of him; aware of his good-looks, his casual charmingness, his virility, his pugnacity, his attentive enterprise at the piano, his bid for Joan's interest, and his confidence in the unimportance of the only competing male. Mr. Clements resented bitterly being considered an unimportant male. He resented Torrington's manner altogether—both towards himself and towards Joan. That odd, instinctive susceptibility of his had noted and weighed a thousand unstatable, imponderable straws that had indicated to him only too clearly the point to which the wind blew. ' He judged Torrington to be one of those simply-constituted, self-complacent youths for whom the conquest of women is the principal business of life. And he divined,

if it no longer belonged to her; then at Mr. Clements's gleaming countenance.

"I don't understand," she said. "I wish you would let my hand go."

He released her hand and gazed at her blankly. "You don't care a damn about me," he said, like a man pronouncing his own death-sentence.

She rose from the ottoman and went to stand by the table, one hand toying with a tea-spoon.

"I do care about you," she said, touched a little by his forlornness. "But I don't like . . . that sort of thing. . . . You say you came back to *me*. Why? Why to *me*?"

"Because you have become the only thing that makes life worth living, for me. That's why, Joan. I am not a fool. I know that I am not one of those men that women fall in love with at first sight. . . . But I thought . . . we had become such friends. I hoped that you had begun to like me." He smiled drably. "Begun to get used to me."

"I do like you," said Joan. "I liked you from the very first. But . . . not that way."

"What way?"

"I don't like your holding my hand . . . and . . . well, talking as you are now . . . flirting. . . ."

"My God!" said Mr. Clements. "Do you think I am flirting with you?"

"Well, yes. . . . I think you are trying to flirt with me."

For a moment Mr. Clements hesitated. Then he plunged.

"I am trying to ask you to marry me, Joan. I am no hand at . . . that sort of thing, as you call it. I ask you, simply, will you marry me?"

"I don't want you to decide now . . . immediately. . . ." he went on, after a pause, "if you don't want to decide now. But I want to make things quite clear, at all events. Come and sit down beside me . . . or somewhere near me . . . and let us talk about it.

"Joan, . . . come here," he said, when for some further

moments she had made no response. "This infernal leg of mine—" He attempted to rise, but his crutches rested against the wall, out of his reach. "Come here, Joan," he entreated, on one leg.

Joan shook her head.

"You won't?" said Mr. Clements, and after a long stare at her downbent face let himself down on to the ottoman miserably. She shook her head again and laid down the tea-spoon with finality.

"I have never thought of you that way, Mr. Clements," she said; "never at all. I didn't think that you had ever thought of me in that . . . well, serious way, either. I like you very much . . . we all do . . . and you have been very nice . . . and kind to me. I'm sure that you think me ungrateful . . . and horrid. . . . But I'm not, really. . . . Only . . . I . . . don't you understand?"

"I understand," replied Mr. Clements, gravely. "As I said just now, you don't care a damn for me. That's what you want to say. . . . Only you are too gentle and dear to say it. Well, little Joan, you know your own heart best. Is it just that? Or is there some one else?"

"Oh, no, there is no one else," replied Joan quickly.

"You are sure, Jo . . . ?"

At that moment, most unkindly, the softened muscles in the thigh of Mr. Clements's broken leg contracted agonisingly.

"A . . . eeh!" he cried, and, clutching the affected region frantically, strove to extend the rest of the limb in a straight line towards the startled Joan.

"What have you done?" she cried, hastening to him.

"Crrrr . . . ramp," said Mr. Clements through clenched teeth. "Justamo . . . ment."

And then Mrs. Velvin returned in her slippers and Amy Lidgett appeared, hovering behind with a tray, and the curtain fell flatly on the great situation of Mr. Clements's life. He departed in the wagonette shortly, bravely stoical, and called a cheery response to the cheery greeting of Martin

Velvin, returning through the Upper Gate with his team.

When the farm had disappeared from view he lit his pipe and prepared to be thoroughly unhappy. But, somehow, unhappiness refused to appear in any considerable quantity. He found himself wondering what explanation he was to offer to his sister for his belated return. He became conscious of a curious buoyancy . . . a sense of escape . . . a rather nervous sprightliness . . . like that of a man who has been nearly run over. . . .

§ iv

Towards two o'clock next morning Mrs. Velvin awoke, lighted a candle, and sat up in bed. Some one was moving about downstairs. In the interval between two of her husband's long-drawn snores she heard the slight rattle of the kitchen-door's loose latch, and the miaul of the cat, which slept there in a decayed hamper beneath the table. When Velvin had been with difficulty awakened, he sat up beside her, listening to the solemn, hollow tick of the clock in the passage.

"I hear nothin'," he said, scratched his head, yawned, and prepared, a little aggrievedly, to return to his pillow.

"There," said Mrs. Velvin.

Unmistakably one of the bolts of the side-door had been withdrawn. Then the other went back with a sharp clack. Velvin rose, put on his trousers, and, taking the candle, went heavily down the creaking stairs.

The kitchen door stood ajar. The cat was purring reassuringly.

"Is that you, Amy?" he called out; then, receiving no reply, crossed the kitchen, and, passing through the scullery, halted in surprise at the open door leading to the yard.

Towards the east, above the misty sombreness of the beeches, a faint rosy flush was creeping up the sky. In the yard a pallid, greenish luminosity struggled with the reat-

ing light that lurked still in the angles of the walls and beneath the long open shed which served as cart-house. And against this wan background Joan was standing ghostly, bare-footed and night-gowned, in the chill air of the dawn, staring, as it seemed to Velvin, straight at him with wide-opened eyes.

"What's to do wi' you, Joan?" he asked, uneasily. "What are you doin' there, my girl, in yer bare feet?"

Candle in hand, he went towards her, halted, went on until he stood beside her.

"Get in, lass," he said gruffly.

Obediently Joan walked to the open door and passed in, out of sight. He followed her up the stairs to her room, stood beside her bed until he had seen her get back into it, drew the bedclothes up over her, and descended again, confounded, to bolt the yard door. When her mother entered her bedroom on tip-toe five minutes later, Joan was smiling childishly, in the soundest and most satisfactory of sleeps.

"Father wants you to lodge a cheque for him in West-bridge," said Mrs. Velvin during breakfast. "It's on the mantelpiece. And I want you to get me a reel of black cotton . . . Number Two." She replenished the tea-pot from the hot-water kettle. "How did you sleep last night?"

Joan cracked the shell of her egg. "I? I slept very well. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," said Mrs. Velvin, replacing the tea-cosy. "I thought I heard you moving about a bit."

Joan shook her head. "No. But I can't think how my feet came to be so dirty this morning. They were black . . . filthy. And it can't have been my stockings. Because I wore grey stockings yesterday, and they're quite clean. I looked at them, to see. But my feet were filthy." She peppered her egg. "Filthy," she repeated vehemently.

"That's funny now," said Mrs. Velvin, and decided to leave it at that.

§ v

'At twenty minutes past twelve, when Joan entered the branch office of the South-Western Counties Bank in West-bridge, a little crowd of people stood in front of the Lodgments cubicle, but Mr. Popplewhite, at the other end of the office, happened for the moment to be disengaged. After a brief inspection of her skirts—for heavy rain had fallen as she passed through the town—she tripped across the tiled floor, opening her bag as she went, and a little embarrassed by her dripping umbrella and the parcel containing her newly-purchased gloves.

"Good day, Miss Velvin," said the little cashier with urbane briskness. "What can we do for you this morning?"

Joan presented her cheque. "This is for lodgment, Miss Velvin, I see," said Mr. Popplewhite, as he examined the endorsement.

She smiled at him as she laid her umbrella against the counter.

"There is such a crowd down there," she said. "I thought, perhaps, . . ."

"Certainly, certainly," beamed Mr. Popplewhite.

He retreated, and reappeared briskly with a lodgment-slip, which he began to fill in with professional rapidity. Joan turned towards the Lodgments cubicle, and encountered the sheepish smile of Caleb Purney. With a glance of withering disdain, she turned again to Mr. Popplewhite.

"We always have a little rush towards closing-time on Saturdays," he said, presenting the slip to her for signature. A sullen rumble drew the gleam of his glasses towards the window behind her. "Thunder. I hope you won't have a wet walk back to Overbarrow, Miss Velvin."

"I hope not," said Joan, underlining her signature with her customary stroke.

"You don't mind thunder, I suppose?" said Mr. Popple-

white. "Ladies, as a rule, are rather nervous about it. Personally, I dislike lightning extremely . . . extremely."

"Indeed?" said Joan politely.

The note of the rain's patter without rose sharply. Joan turned her head to the window. Against the fronts of the houses facing the bank a solid, whitish torrent was descending vertically.

"What a bold hand yours is, Miss Velvin," said Mr. Poplewhite, picking up the lodgment docket and blotting it carefully. "Most characteristic. I am rather a student of calligraphy, you know. In a bank one gets into the habit. . . ."

A dazzling flash interrupted him. Joan saw his hands and the lodgment-docket jump spasmodically. Almost simultaneously, a smashing, crashing, rending peal of thunder split the air, as it seemed, just over the building.

"Zee!" said Mr. Poplewhite, showing his gold-stopped teeth and blowing through them. "That was close." He laughed nervously, then, recollecting himself, divided the docket at its perforation, and handed Joan her portion. She thanked him, put it away carefully in her bag, picked up her parcel and her umbrella, and looked cautiously again towards the other end of the office. To her dismay she perceived that Purney had moved to the door and was waiting there, certainly for her.

The peal which followed was a comparatively mild and remote one. Mr. Poplewhite resumed the thread of his discourse. "I was saying, one gets, in our business, into the habit of studying our customers' signatures. I think I may say without vanity that I can tell from almost any signature the character of the person who has written it."

"Really?" said Joan.

What a funny, prim, old-maidish little man he was, with his glasses and his little tight collar and his prominent Adam's-apple that bulged uncomfortably beneath the skin of his little scraggy throat. In a corner behind him, beyond the piles of coin and notes, she beheld his little detachable

cuffs, one neatly encircling the other. How the lightning had made him jump. She supposed that he was not more than forty; but behind the baffling scintillations of his glasses seemed to lurk the crabbed wiseness of a very old little woman. And the funny, prim, old-maidish little thing was in love with her. She was perfectly assured that he was in love with her—in a prim, old-maidish little way. She was perfectly aware that he had stretched the point enormously in accepting a lodgment from her instead of passing her on to the prescribed cubicle. She was perfectly confident that he would do for her anything she chose to ask him to do. At the recollection of her vague, momentary consideration of him as a possible husband a faint amusement parted her lips for an instant.

“The rain is stopping now, I think,” she said. “I had better get on my way. Good morning, Mr. Popplewhite.”

Obsequiously Caleb Purney held the swinging door back for her egress.

“Thank you,” she said coldly.

“May I speak to you for a moment?” he asked, letting the door swing to behind them.

Joan opened her umbrella and raised her face to the sky. The rain still fell desultorily, but already from beneath the lurid skirts of the retreating storm a washed blue sky was emerging benignly.

“I think, after yesterday,” she said severely, “you might understand that I do not wish to have any conversation with you.”

“I’m sorry for what happened yesterday,” said the huge young man, like a penitent child. “I didn’t mean to be so rough-like.”

“I am not accustomed to that sort of thing,” said Joan. She raised her umbrella as she spoke, and walked sedately away from him down the narrow street.

But she felt now not the slightest indignation with Caleb Purney, scarcely the faintest dislike of him. He appeared

to her now simply a phenomenon of the intensely-varied and active life that had suddenly swept her into the whirl of its business—an unimportant phenomenon, but a component of the whole, and therefore to be accepted with magnanimous tolerance. She felt that in that whole she herself had at last been assigned a part; that opportunity had opened before her—that opportunity which alone had been wanting for her successful *début*. In eight hours her estimation of her ability to avail herself of it had risen enormously. Things—real, live, important things, had begun to happen to her; and she had dealt with them, it seemed to her, triumphantly. She had lingered over her dressing that morning, pausing for long consultations of her mirror; and no least doubt had been possible that she was, from all angles from full-face to profile, an adorably pretty girl. She was keenly aware now of the intent masculine glances that directed themselves into the shade of her umbrella as she passed down the High Street and across the Market Square and round the angle of the Court House out of the town. Yesterday she had passed those same glances in the same places heedlessly, almost sullenly. Yesterday they had been the dull glance of the dull youth of a dull little country town. This morning they were the homage of the men of the world.

The rain had stopped; the sun was shining. At the Schoolhouse she closed her umbrella. Every leaf in the lane before her was hung with glittering diamonds. The air was filled with rich, pungent fragrance. Myriad chirpings and twitterings and trills and roulades blended themselves in ecstatic orchestra. She passed with tripping feet through the gladness of living, at last alive.

CHAPTER VIII

§ i

ON the terrace of Shalcott House Mrs. Torrington was playing gracefully with her son James Talbot Cressway Torrington, aged nine, and her daughter, Millicent Diana Cressway Torrington, aged seven-and-a-half. The game was a triangular one. The boy threw the ball to his mother, who invariably failed to catch it, and uttered a shrill little peal of laughter each time that she did so. The boy cried each time disdainfully: "Butter-fingers." Mrs. Torrington, having then recovered the ball with sinuous flutterings and swoopings, threw it to Millicent, who sometimes caught it but more often did not. At each failure the boy said disdainfully: "Butter-fingers." Millicent then threw, theoretically to her brother, but in fact anywhere else. After each of her throws a heated argument ensued as to her inability to throw straightly, her deliberate unfairness in throwing and her general futility and unsatisfactoriness as a thrower.

"Now, Jimty, . . . it is your turn," Mrs. Torrington would say when she had grown weary of the discussion, and the boy, with flushed cheeks, would take bloodthirsty aim at her, while she defied him with playful skips.

She had been twenty-one when William Torrington, ten years before, had made her his second wife. She looked no more now: a slim, dark, kittenish young woman, with quick, kittenish movements and laughing, kittenish eyes. Her husband, who had been her senior by nearly thirty years, had, it was rumoured, experienced considerable difficulty in monopolising her kittenishness, and though she had been shrewd enough to avert any open rupture, their relations during the period immediately preceding his death had been something

less than amicable. The greater part of his large fortune had gone to the only child of his first marriage; and the trusts which had provided for James Talbot and Millicent Diana had severely limited their mother's control of the remainder. Mrs. Torrington and her stepson had, however, always been sworn allies, and, pending other arrangements, she had continued to reside at Shalcott in apparent contentment. It was supposed by Cecil and by every one else that she would remarry, after a decent interval; meanwhile she managed his house for him with the utmost efficiency and affection.

With reference to his engagement to Marjory Holthurst she had displayed the most charming of sisterly resignations. Perceiving, however, that his fiancée manifested a marked lack of enthusiasm in regard to Cecil's original proposal that she should remain on at Shalcott after his marriage, she had been the first to suggest that she should move herself and her children elsewhere in preparation for it. As she desired to live nearer to Bristol, her brother-in-law, James Torrington—now the senior partner of the firm—who lived at Clifton, had undertaken to make inquiry as to a suitable house. And it was to report upon his progress in this undertaking that he had come thirty miles to Shalcott on that blazing afternoon in early June.

He sat now in a basket chair, his spindle legs crossed, his Homburg tilted slightly backwards on his large head, sometimes turning over the pages of one of his sister-in-law's papers which he had taken from her chair, sometimes watching the noisy game. Though his views with regard to the observance of the Sabbath were notoriously rigid, he smiled occasionally fishily at Edna Torrington's kittenishness. Then, grave and tight-mouthed again, he returned to the newspaper.

It was a new and highly-priced publication entitled "Ariadne," devoted entirely to feminine interests. The advertisements were lavishly illustrated by representations of superbly-curved young women in varying stages of undress.

Upon these the elderly man's gaze lingered with fishy absorption. Sometimes, as his eye fell upon some especially candid revelation, his lips parted and his tongue uttered a soft cluck of protest. He was careful to hold the newspaper so that his sister-in-law saw but its cover.

"Butter-fingers," said Jimty, for the hundredth time. "Now. Throw hard . . . as hard as you can."

Millicent braced her small body for a mighty effort, executed three preparatory skips, shut her eyes tightly, and threw the ball in a wild, wide curve high in the air. It fell beyond the balustrading of the terrace on the tennis-courts, fifteen feet below, recoverable now only by a long detour. The boy scowled furiously.

"You may go and get it now, stupid," he said, digging his hands into his trousers pockets and stalking towards the nearest chair.

"I don't want to play any more," said Millicent. "You can get it if you want it."

Her brother deflected his course towards her threateningly. She squealed and fled for protection to her mother.

"Run along and get it, Jimty," said Mrs. Torrington.

"Shan't," said Jimty sullenly. "She threw it. She ought to get it."

"Don't argue," said his mother. "And take your hands out of your pockets. Go and get it at once."

"Shan't," repeated the rebel doggedly. "She threw it."

"Very well. You shall go in, at once, for being so disobedient."

"Shan't."

"Jimty!"

But Jimty was not to be intimidated by mere gazings of shocked reproach. Millicent was despatched to summon assistance.

"Ask Miss Payne to come to me, dear," said Mrs. Torrington, and seated herself beside her brother-in-law while she waited.

"That boy wants to be taken firmly in hand," said James Torrington, bending his fishy stare on the culprit. "Why don't you send him to school, Edna?"

"I shall have to send him to school in the autumn," said Mrs. Torrington. "He should have gone last year if he had not been so delicate."

James Torrington sniffed sceptically.

"Pish! He looks as strong as a young bull," he said coldly. "You've spoiled him, Edna. That's all that is the matter with him."

Beneath this candid criticism Jimty glowered furiously. Every now and then his eyes rolled malevolently towards the door through which Millicent had disappeared.

Miss Payne emerged after some minutes quickly, a colourless, dejected-looking, middle-aged woman whose sallow face expressed at the moment a feeble and diffident sternness.

"Take Jimty in, Miss Payne, please," commanded her employer. "Take him upstairs and do not allow him, under any circumstances, to come downstairs again until I send for him."

"Very well, Mrs. Torrington," said the governess. She approached the recalcitrant briskly. "Come Jimty," she said with firmness. Jimty merely rolled his eyes warningly. She laid a hand on his shoulder, bending a little to him. "Come. Like a good boy. . . ." she urged, and received a vicious and resounding smack that sent her tottering backwards, hand to cheek, gasping with fright and pain. Mrs. Torrington rose.

"James," she said appealingly. And the elderly man advanced solemnly upon his outrageous nephew.

"If any one touches me," said the boy through his teeth, "they'll be sorry for it. I tell you," he cried, springing to his feet and preparing for vigorous defence, "you'll be sorry for it. Just you look out."

His uncle paused, irresolutely. Miss Payne, whimpering into her handkerchief, disappeared into the house. Mrs.

Torrington spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"Come," said James Torrington; "let us leave him to his wicked, devilish temper." He turned with dignity and walked into the house. Mrs. Torrington gathered Millicent to her and essayed a last horrified appeal. "Jimty!" she said, incredulously. Then, still holding Millicent tightly to her, she followed her brother-in-law slowly. Jimty, like a sinister graven image, stared away to the blue distant Cotswolds.

§ ii

He was still sitting there, nearly an hour later, when his brother Cecil, whom he disliked, and Marjory Holthurst, whom he detested, came down the steps from the house with his mother. Behind them followed his uncle, his sister, and a lady whom he had never seen before. The little procession ignored him pointedly and went to seat itself in a half-circle at the further end of the terrace. From time to time Millicent turned to regard his isolation primly. Each time that she did so he despatched to her across the sunlight a grimace of disdainful and derisive hate.

His offence had assumed serious proportions in the interval. Miss Payne, having indulged for some little time in mild hysteria, had stated regretfully her inability to overlook this final outrage of his contumeliousness. She had confessed herself unwilling to attempt any longer to control his violent temper and his sullen obstinacy, and had complained bitterly of his mother's insufficient support to her disputed authority. Mrs. Torrington disapproved her son's temper; but far more seriously did she disapprove of complaining inferiors. Under the stress of her rebuke Miss Payne's hysteria had renewed itself, and had culminated in the announcement of her intention to depart from Shalcott at the earliest possible moment. At that moment, indeed, she was packing her small trunk, into which, as she packed, there

still trickled from her faded eyes tears of righteous indignation.

Upon this crisis Cecil Torrington and his two passengers had arrived distractingly. It was Joan's first visit to Shalcott and her first meeting with Mrs. Torrington, whose pretty dismay at the tragedy of the afternoon she admired greatly. The visit was an impromptu one, suggested casually by Cecil after lunch at Manton, in default of any other arrangement for the hot Sunday afternoon. She had contrived, however, a toilet of anxious fastidiousness, and had felt herself rewarded by the cordiality of her hostess's greeting and the almost deferential *empressement* with which James Torrington had acknowledged his introduction to her. As she sat now facing the grave, elderly brewer, whom she knew to be one of the richest men in Bristol, she was aware that his deferential scrutiny travelled slowly over her, curiously, cautiously, and a little furtively. She thought him an extremely ugly old man, but his scrutiny pleased her.

Cecil and Marjory, who had disagreed while Joan was dressing—it had not transpired why—and who had been noticeably silent during the drive from Manton, made no contribution to the conversation which Mrs. Torrington's kittenishness monopolised. Marjory had been, even for her, unusually taciturn for some days and prone to an unfamiliar snappishness which directed itself more particularly towards Cecil but was liable to flicker towards any surrounding object without explanation. She sat now, with a bored frown, listening indifferently to Mrs. Torrington's prattling and watching the violet shadow of her shoe on the white pavement of the terrace.

"I can't think where he gets his temper from," said Mrs. Torrington. "I'm sure his poor father was the most even-tempered man that ever lived. And as for me, everybody knows that I am a perfect angel. Poor Miss Payne. She has done her best, poor thing. But, really, I am not sorry that she is going. Her appearance depressed me. Of course

she can't help it, poor creature . . . but her appearance is depressing. I can't bear unhappy-looking people about me. Though it was very shocking of Jimty to behave like that, of course."

"Miss Payne is leaving, then?" enquired Cecil carelessly.

"Yes. It is rather a nuisance, her going off like that. But the poor old thing worked herself up, and, really, she was quite . . . quite impertinent. I suppose she will go to-morrow."

"What will you do?" asked her stepson.

Mrs. Torrington shrugged her slender shoulders. "What can I do? Look out for some one else, I suppose. I shall get some one much younger, this time. Some one who can put Master Jimty across her knee, if necessary, and give him a good spanking."

"He wants it badly," said James Torrington, with cold enthusiasm.

"Little beggar," said Cecil, smiling. "He threw a flower-pot at me yesterday because I wouldn't let him scratch all the paint off the car by climbing into it over the back."

"What a naughty little boy," said Joan. "Did he hit you?"

"No. He didn't get me. But he got one of the gardeners on the side of the head, and jolly nearly knocked him out."

"He requires very firm handling, that boy," said James Torrington. "He looked at me most murderously just now . . . I certainly think it will be a very grave mistake on your part, Edna, if you allow his performance this afternoon to go unpunished."

"Well, but . . . who is to punish him?" expostulated Mrs. Torrington. "I can't. He is much too strong for me. Cecil won't. He just laughs. Unless I invoke the assistance of one of the servants. . . ." She smiled across at Joan. "Isn't it a pretty state of affairs, Miss Velvin?"

Cecil rose from his chair and pulled down his waistcoat.

Joan noticed that his waist was as slim as a girl's. "Where is the old ball?" he asked.

"On the tennis-court somewhere," replied his stepmother.

The young man considered the small lonely figure at the other end of the terrace thoughtfully for a moment, then turned to Joan.

"Let us see if we can't persuade him to a better frame of mind, Miss Velvin. He loathes me . . . but I am sure you can persuade any one to be good."

Joan rose, smiling and blushing prettily. "I shouldn't make a fuss about him, Joan," said Marjory. "He'll probably shy something at you."

Under cover of her pretty blushing smile Joan searched her friend's face for an instant. Marjory's brown cheeks had flushed as she spoke and an unmistakable estrangement had hardened the stare of her slightly prominent brown eyes. A suspicion that had been growing steadily in Joan's mind for some days past became a certainty. She turned, still smiling, and walked with Cecil slowly towards the motionless Jimty. James Torrington's grave gaze followed the supple sway of her admirable figure with cold approval.

"Who is this charming Miss Velvin?" he enquired, leaning towards his sister-in-law.

Mrs. Torrington glanced discreetly at Marjory's irregular profile. "Cecil calls her 'Joan of Overbarrow,'" she replied, smiling. "He rather raves about her. That is really all that I know about Miss Velvin except that she was at school with Marjory. What a lovely complexion she has."

She paused to look towards the other end of the terrace. Jimty had risen and had accompanied Joan to the balustrade, over which they were now both leaning, obviously seeking to descry the errant ball. Behind them Cecil stood smiling amusedly. After a moment the boy left Joan and, descending the steps, disappeared for a little space. "Look out," called his voice from below, and, as Joan caught the

ball that rose to her with her left hand dexterously, "Oh, good catch! Now . . . you chuck it to me."

"I'm coming down," said Joan, and disappeared too.

"Another conquest," said Mrs. Torrington, as Cecil returned to his chair beside her. He considered his cigarette meditatively.

"That's the sort of person you want to manage Jimty just at present, Edna," he said slowly. "And I expect it's just the sort of job Miss Velvin would like. What do you think, Marjory?"

Marjory walked to the balustrade and stood looking down to the tennis-courts for a little while. Jimty, not very successfully, was endeavouring to emulate Joan's prowess with her left hand. Joan's clear voice rose to the terrace.

"Bah! Butter-fingers."

Marjory returned to the chairs. "I think that's rather a brilliant idea of yours, Cecil," she said quietly.

"What?" asked Mrs. Torrington. "Do you mean . . . ?"

"I mean, why not ask Miss Velvin if she'd like to take on Miss What-do-you-call-her's job?" said Cecil, yawning, "I'm sure she's quite capable of putting Jimty across her knee."

§ iii

Late in the afternoon of the following Wednesday, Cecil, who had been obliged to run up to London for a couple of days, returned to Shalcott to find Joan installed, apparently to the contentment of every one concerned, in Miss Payne's place. His stepmother, whom he discovered reclining in elaborate *négligé* in the room which she called her "nest," was loud in her praises of the new governess. Miss Velvin was *such* a charming girl, *so* capable, *so* tactful with the children, *so* clever at games, *so* obliging, and with *such* an excellent French accent. Jimty had been *so* good, and Millicent had already learned *such* a pretty little song. Miss Velvin, too, was *so* soothing to look at. Mrs. Torrington

was perfectly certain that it could not have been good for the children to have looked at Miss Payne for so long. She was perfectly certain, also, that Millicent had contracted from Miss Payne her distressing habit of screwing up her eyes, wrinkling her nose, and sticking out her chin when she spoke.

Cecil, perched on the end of the big couch upon which Mrs. Torrington reposed gracefully amongst her cushions, swung his long legs and listened amiably to these confidential prattlings. He made no allusion to his excursion to London, and Mrs. Torrington made none. Whatever her surmises as to the causes which compelled her stepson to run up to London for a couple of days so frequently, she was careful to display no curiosity whatever with regard to them. But she ventured upon a playful warning as he sauntered towards the door.

"Now . . . no pranks with this young woman, mind."

The young man smiled. "Pranks?" he repeated, in virtuous surprise.

Mrs. Torrington shook her forefinger at him. "Bad boy. I know all about you. But I really mean it, Cecil. It will be an awful bore for me if we have any unpleasantness with the Holthursts, you know. So . . . please behave."

"I'll try to," said Cecil, blew her a kiss, and left the room.

Guided by the tinkling of a remote piano, he found Joan in the schoolroom, struggling with Millicent's maladroit fingers. At one of the windows Jimty, with knitted brows, was copying a horse from an illustrated paper. On a table near the piano stood Joan's writing-case, and an opened letter the large handwriting of which Cecil recognised as Marjory's.

"Please don't let me disturb you, Miss Velvin. I hope these young people are going on satisfactorily?"

"Oh, quite, I think," said Joan, sedately. "I hope that you had a pleasant time in London."

"Very, thank you," said the young man. He strolled

over to inspect Jimty's handiwork. "That's quite good, Jimty. I didn't know you were such a dab at that sort of thing."

"We discovered it quite by accident yesterday," said Joan, joining him behind the gratified artist. "Jimty says that he has always wanted to learn to draw."

"Yes. But old Pinchy-Payne wouldn't let me draw," said the boy, proudly surveying his copy. "She called it scribbling. I'd sooner draw than do anything else."

"Good," said Cecil. "And what about Millicent's new song? When am I to hear it?"

"Well . . . not just now, I think," said Joan. "It's just tea-time now, isn't it?"

As she spoke the clamour of the gong boomed through the house. Millicent pulled up her stockings and moved towards the door.

"I don't want tea," said Jimty. "I'd rather go on drawing."

Joan took his pencil from his hand and flicked his ear with it. "I'd rather, thou'dst rather, he'd rather, we'd rather, you'd rather, they'd rather . . . but we've all got to do what we're told to do." She gathered up the illustrated paper and Jimty's drawing and put them away in a drawer. The boy grinned and followed his sister towards the door.

"Run along," said Joan. "I am coming."

She waited until the sound of the children's footsteps had reached the landing below. Cecil watched her curiously.

"I want to thank you, Mr. Torrington," she said with a pretty formality, "for having suggested to Mrs. Torrington that I should take charge of Jimty and Millicent."

"Not at all," said the young man coolly. "It seemed the obvious suggestion."

"It was really awfully kind of you," urged Joan. "I feel sure that I shall be very happy here with the children . . . and I think that they are going to like me. I haven't had any opportunity of thanking you before . . . and, besides,

you see . . . I thought the suggestion had come from Marjory."

"Oh," said Cecil. "I see. . . . Well . . . so it did . . . to a large extent."

"Marjory doesn't say so," said Joan, picking up the letter which lay beside her writing-case. "In fact, I don't think Marjory quite approves of the idea."

"Oh," said Cecil again. "I see. What does she say?"

MY DEAR JOAN, (wrote Marjory.) Thanks for your note. It must have been rather a rush for you. I am glad your mother is pleased. Also that you think you will like the work. But don't make up your mind too quickly about that and please note that the proposal was entirely Cecil's and not mine. Victor comes home for four days to-night. I don't suppose you will be able to get over here, but he may be able to go across to Shalcott to see you. I'm quite sure he will if he can. Harold comes down on Monday. Best love.

MARJORY.

"Victor a great pal of yours?" asked Cecil, when he had listened to this communication, going towards a window.

"I am very fond of Victor," said Joan, with grave sincerity.

"How nice for Victor," said Cecil. "You care for a game of tennis before dinner?"

Joan hesitated. "Do you think Mrs. Torrington would like . . ." she began.

"Like your playing tennis? Of course. Why not?" He swung round on his heels, hands in pockets, and regarded her with his easy, sardonic smile.

"I think not," said Joan quietly. "Thank you very much. . . . Perhaps some other time. . . . And now I must go to tea."

As they reached the landing Jimty's impatient protest rose to them. "You've been ages and ages," he complained. "I could have gone on with my drawing while you were

talking to Cecil. You just wanted to get us out of the room."

"Observant little brute," said Cecil, smiled, and strolled away towards his room.

Joan decided, as she watched her charges devouring large platefuls of strawberries-and-cream, that her manner towards Mr. Cecil Torrington must in future exhibit a greater reserve. She admitted that his invasion of the school-room might as a first friendly visit be overlooked; but she was resolved to discourage its too-frequent repetition firmly. Mr. Torrington should have knocked before entering, she felt, and should not have spoken to her so very casually and with his hands in his pockets. She was glad that she had refused that game of tennis, though the indifference with which her refusal had been accepted nettled her a little. Later on, when she had established her position at Shalcott and had assured herself of Mrs. Torrington's approval by a whole-hearted devotion to the children, it would be delightful to play tennis with Mr. Torrington in the afternoons. But for the present she judged it unwise to presume too much upon her employer's good will or to make herself too cheap for her stepson's amusement. Yes. She was very glad that she had refused to play tennis before dinner.

The coolness of Marjory's letter troubled her a good deal, too. As she had returned to Overbarrow on Sunday evening to collect a more extensive and more serviceable wardrobe, there had been little time for discussion at Manton of the proposal which Mrs. Torrington had made so prettily to her that afternoon and which she had accepted unhesitatingly. But she had left Manton with the conviction that the proposal had really emanated from Marjory, and had kissed her with grateful affection at parting. The discovery from Marjory's letter that the real author of the suggestion had been the puzzling and off-hand Cecil, had preoccupied her thoughts since breakfast-time. She arrived, however, at no definite conclusion with regard to his share in the matter.

Perhaps Marjory had told him of her discontent with her life at Overbarrow. Perhaps he had merely intended to make use of her to help his stepmother out of a difficulty. Perhaps, despite that not very polite off-handedness of his, he had seen an opportunity to bring her nearer to him. Whatever the explanation the fact remained that she was now living under the same roof with him, liable at every moment of the day to close and treacherous contacts. Her dependent position complicated her difficulties with regard to him. Had he spoken to her three days before with his hands in his trouser-pockets, it would have been quite a different and scarcely noticeable matter. But now—in consideration of their altered relations—he should have been more careful. Yes, certainly she had done the wise and becoming thing in refusing to play tennis.

But she knew that she desired, at that moment, beyond anything else in the world, to play tennis with him.

“Are you any good at tennis, Jimty?” she asked, as that healthily-appetited youth threw himself back in his chair with a sigh of regretful repletion.

“Pretty good,” he admitted modestly.

“And you, Millicent?”

“Oh, she’s no good,” declared her brother. “I’ll show you how she plays.”

“Well, then,” said Joan, cutting short the proposed demonstration ruthlessly, “the sooner she learns to play properly the better. Millicent and I will play you.”

“I’ll give you fifteen,” said Jimty magnanimously.

Joan and Millicent took the first set love. Jimty, scarlet-faced and winded, flung himself on the grass for a respite.

“Jimty and I will play you and Millicent, Miss Velvin,” said a voice from the terrace above.

“Very well, Mr. Torrington,” said Joan, smiling up at him. “If you are determined to play tennis . . .”

§ iv

After breakfast next morning Mrs. Torrington and Cecil set off for Clifton to inspect a house which James Torrington had strongly recommended. Joan was giving Millicent a music-lesson in the school-room when a maid came to inform her that Mr. Holthurst had called and wished, if possible, to see her. Jimty having requested to be left to his beloved drawing, Joan descended with Millicent, to find Victor Holthurst awaiting her in the library.

She had not seen him for four years, but the changes which the interval had wrought in his appearance were exactly those which she had expected. He was now a stalwart, sunburnt, pleasant-looking young man of twenty-three, a little noticeably occupied with his trousers and a small fair moustache. His resemblance to his father had accentuated itself, and his eyes had a great deal of the extraordinary friendliness and faithfulness that for Joan distinguished the Old Gunner from all other men. His clothes fitted him beautifully and the hand which shook Joan's warmly gave her the impression of a steel vice. She noticed at once that his tie and his socks were of exactly the same shade, and that he was a little shy, as he had always been at first when they had met after a long interval.

She took him out on to the terrace and for a little time plied him with questions concerning his work. There were a very decent lot of chaps in the Mess, he said. The Colonel's wife was rather a fussy old thing, but the Colonel himself was a good old chap. He had come from the Curragh . . . rather a deadly journey. The Curragh was rather a deadly hole, but Dublin was not so bad. The Gunner had looked him up on his way to Connemara. The Gunner had looked very fit; a wonderful chap, keen as mustard, spry as a two-year-old.

"You look topping," he said abruptly, surveying Joan from head to foot gravely with simple admiration.

"Do I?" laughed Joan. "I'm afraid I've grown much fatter since you saw me last. Have I?"

"Well . . . you're plumper," said the candid Victor.

"Do you remember, you used to be able to lift me over the tennis-net? I don't think you could do that now."

Victor's sunburnt face flushed a little. "I don't know about that," he said, and tucked up his trousers quite unnecessarily. "How do you like being here?" he asked, observing that Millicent had abandoned them in boredom.

"Very much indeed," said Joan enthusiastically. "Mrs. Torrington is so kind and nice. Isn't she pretty? I think she has the loveliest eyes . . ."

Victor grinned. "Haven't noticed. They say she is going to marry Lomax, don't they?"

"I don't know. Who is Mr. Lomax?"

"Oh . . . he used to be rather a friend of hers," said Victor, somewhat evasively. "How do you get on with Cecil? All right?"

"Mr. Torrington? I don't see much of him. But he has been very kind and nice to me, too."

"He would be," said Victor laconically.

Joan laughed, and went to meet Millicent, who had grown weary of sliding down the balustrading of the steps and now returned with a torn stocking and grimy hands. The conversation returned to warlike subjects for a little while until Millicent consented to withdraw to change her stockings and wash her hands.

"The fair Edna thinks of leaving Shalcott, I hear," said the young man.

"Yes. I suppose Marjory will get married if she does . . . or will she?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Marjory's brother, frowning a little. "I don't believe she will ever marry Torrington."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. But somehow I don't think so," Victor smiled somewhat ruefully. "Poor old Marjory."

"Isn't she fond of him, then?" asked Joan, after a pause.

"It isn't that. I don't think she's certain that he's really fond of her. That's the trouble. I don't believe he is. I don't believe he's capable of being fond of any one, really—Cecil."

"Poor old Marjory is no beauty," he went on, after some moments. "That's certain. Of course, she's a top-hole sportsman . . . and all that sort of thing. . . . And she's got a will of her own . . . I expect you've noticed that. I think Cecil is a bit afraid of her really. . . ." He contemplated his smart shoe profoundly, then smiled as he raised his eyes to Joan's. "I don't know. I give it up. But I bet they never get married."

"What a cheerful, complimentary brother you are," said Joan.

"I think, on the whole, we should all be glad if the thing were broken off," said Victor frankly. "I know the mater would. You see," he went on confidentially, "I'm afraid that really I was responsible for Marjory's becoming engaged to him."

"You?" repeated Joan, in surprise.

"Yes. You see, I saw Cecil skylarking with Marjory one afternoon . . . oh, nothing much . . . still, I didn't like it . . . because . . . well, I didn't like it. And I said so. Quite quietly, of course. But he went straightway and proposed to Marjory, slap off."

"What did you say to him?" said Joan curiously.

"Well, I just said that I didn't care for that sort of thing, and that I thought the Old Gunner would make a fuss if he knew about it. Just something to that effect. But Cecil's a funny beggar, you see. He's . . . mind you, he's a topping good chap most ways . . . but some ways he's . . . half-baked. And he knows it. I mean, he's always trying to do the right thing. Haven't you noticed it? That

supercilious manner of his . . . that's all fake . . . deliberately put on, because he's got it into his head that one should never be polite, and never show any interest in anything. Of course, a certain amount of that sort of thing is all right. But he just overdoes it . . . he always did. And he has a sort of uncomfortable idea that he always does just overdo it. You know what I mean?"

"Well . . . but . . ." began Joan.

"Well, then, you see . . . I think he got it into his head, just for the moment, that he wasn't doing the right thing, and that we thought he wasn't doing the right thing . . . and so he went off and asked Marjory to marry him. Of course, she said she would . . . because she has always been fearfully keen about him, and . . . well, there you are. I think it's a dash silly idea, the whole thing."

"I shouldn't have thought Mr. Torrington would do anything in a hurry," said Joan, reflectively.

"Cecil's a funny chap," said Victor, sagely. "You'll find that out when you know him better."

The reappearance of Millicent, accompanied by her brother, eager to exhibit his completed drawing, interrupted these confidences. Victor hurried away shortly afterwards to catch the train that was to take him to lunch at Bath with some friends. At parting his vice-like grip held Joan's hand with something more than fraternal warmth, and his smile had an unmistakable wistfulness. But the children stood a few yards away, highly-interested spectators of his leave-taking.

"Well, I suppose I shall get some leave some time," he said, hesitated, smiled again, and went away.

Mrs. Torrington's eyebrows lifted a little when she learned that Miss Velvin had entertained Mr. Holthurst for nearly two hours on the terrace.

"I think it would have been better, Miss Velvin, if Mr. Holthurst had chosen a day when I was at home. . . . It is a little difficult . . . I am sure you acted quite inno-

cently . . . but I am rather annoyed that Mr. Holthurst should have asked to see you when he had been told that I was not at home. . . . You will know . . . for the future . . . ?”

“Oh, yes, Mrs. Torrington,” said the crimson-faced Joan. “I am so sorry.”

§ v

But Mrs. Torrington quickly forgot her slight displeasure with regard to this incident in the satisfactory progress of the new governess in more important matters. Joan’s ascendancy over the difficult Jimty was complete; her nod or her smile controlled him to an obedience to which neither his mother’s threats nor cajolements could persuade him. Millicent, who was her mother’s favourite, surrendered a little less implicitly to subordinate government, but possessed no talent for serious naughtiness. In the school-room, which in Miss Payne’s days had been a place of strident voices and passionate tearfulness, peace now reigned all the morning.

Joan applied herself to the more serious side of her new duties with conscientiousness, and during her leisure hours devoted a considerable amount of time to brushing up her French and German, in both of which languages she quickly revived the slightly inaccurate fluency which she had acquired at St. Angela’s. The afternoons were given up to amusement, two of the seven being nominally at her own disposal. But, in fact, as she had no friends within convenient reach save the Holthursts, and the grounds of Shalcott seemed to her far preferable to the roads, she spent all these free afternoons with the children. Not infrequently Mrs. Torrington joined them. She found in Joan an intelligent and appreciative audience for her sprightly chattering and a discreet repository for confidences which became, as the weeks went by, more and more unreserved.

Usually when the afternoon brought visitors to the house, the children were summoned to the drawing-room or the

terrace. Joan, demure and self-effacing, made herself gracefully useful—especially to the more elderly guests, from whom her thoughtful attentiveness won golden opinions. She was introduced to a good-looking and rather flirtatious Mr. Lomax, upon whose gaiety Mrs. Torrington kept a watchful eye, and from whose anxiety to be taken to the schoolroom to inspect Jimty's drawings Joan extricated herself with some difficulty, to Cecil Torrington's visible amusement.

Of Cecil she saw surprisingly little. His visit to the schoolroom was not repeated; and if Joan had flattered herself that she had awakened an interest in his self-satisfied and conceited breast, the impression dissipated itself speedily. Beyond a formal "good-morning" or "good-afternoon," with perhaps a reference to the weather of the hour, he made no attempt to speak to her, even when they met in the retirement of the upper staircase. He disappeared, sometimes for a day, sometimes for a week; reappeared with his eternal sardonic smile, supercilious and remote.

In her lonely hours Joan thought a great deal about him in a vaguely resentful way. Absent or present, he irritated her. To a certain extent Victor Holthurst's estimate of him had revised her own impressions, but she had come to the conclusion that that estimate was in the main a mistaken one. Victor she considered a youth of much too simple and peremptory perceptions to understand a character of any unusual complexity. And Cecil Torrington, whether she liked him or disliked him, she at all events judged to be a most unusually complicated person. In what way complicated she did not attempt to explain to herself; nor did she define to herself the grounds upon which she suspected him of a subtlety too delicate for Victor's intuitions. But she was sure that he was a quite extraordinary young man. It seemed to her that his saturnine smile and his imperturbable indifference must conceal strange and unusual thoughts and views of things—that behind them must be hidden a strange and unusual personality. She rather suspected, an

unpleasant personality—a little brutal, a little cruel, even vicious . . . yet, somehow, interest-compelling.

From Mrs. Torrington she learned after a little while that the business which took him up to London so frequently was a young woman named Letty Blair, whose charms were one of the principal attractions of the latest musical comedy. Joan procured a picture-postcard upon which these charms were portrayed with admirable candour. Often, in her bedroom, she took it out from her trunk and, seating herself on the edge of her bed, gazed at it curiously.

She endeavoured to picture to herself the circumstances of those far-off and presumably improper meetings. She supposed that after the theatre they would go to supper at a fashionable restaurant, a brilliantly-wicked supper of which champagne and sparkling badinage formed the principal ingredients, with a string band playing voluptuous waltzes in the background. They would drink the champagne gazing into one another's eyes across the table. After supper they would go to Miss Blair's villa in St. John's Wood—without doubt she lived in a villa in St. John's Wood. And there, amid surroundings of the most luxurious and expensive kind, the fair, frail Letty would abandon herself to Mr. Torrington's caresses. Sometimes the vividness with which Joan's imagination evoked that surrender caused her to accuse herself of an immodesty grave enough to provoke her, unwittingly, to a blush.

In justice to Miss Blair, a discreet and prudent young person, who resided with a most respectable and vigilant mother in Nevern Square, and who subsequently became a most respectable peeress, it must be stated that these speculations of Joan's did her serious injustice. For her, in truth, Mr. Torrington was merely one of a large number of more or less infatuated young men whose presents of jewellery and flowers at times hardly consoled her for the tiresomeness of their solicitations. But the smirking picture-postcard afforded Joan no hint of these disillusioning verities. In its

hard, bold eyes and simpering lips lay for her the mystery and glamour of the sinner of unknown sins . . . the enigma of the wanton.

Sometimes the disloyalty to Marjory which these frequent disappearances to London implied appeared to her rather shocking. But she found it more and more difficult to sympathise with Marjory. It seemed to her almost unreasonable that the undistinguished Marjory should expect to monopolise a young man like Cecil Torrington. Whatever the reasons which had originally induced him to tie himself to her—and as to these Joan was, finally, utterly at a loss—she felt sure that now the bond was of the slightest. And in this opinion the confidences of Mrs. Torrington confirmed her strongly. The announcement by Cecil himself, shortly after his return at the end of September from a yachting cruise amongst the Norwegian fjords, that his marriage was to take place early in the following Spring, came with all the novelty of the totally unexpected.

Mrs. Torrington at once resumed with energy her quest—grown of late somewhat dilatory—of a new home, and, having wavered for some weeks between the blandishments of three firms of agents, succumbed to those of a fourth, and decided upon taking the house which her brother-in-law had originally recommended to her, and which lay close to his own at Stoke Bishop. The supervision of the necessary repairs and re-decorations and the selection of furniture requiring her constant presence in Clifton she decided towards the middle of October to accept James Torrington's hospitality for some weeks and to take the children with her. It was on the day following this decision, a Sunday, that a telegram, received during Joan's luncheon, informed her that her father was dying in Westbridge Infirmary.

§ vi

Nothing could have been kinder or more considerate and helpful than Mrs. Torrington's behaviour on learning of

these evil tidings. Joan received permission to go at once to Westbridge and to remain there as long as should be necessary. The telegram had given a hotel in the town as her mother's address, and Joan was writing in the schoolroom a reply announcing her arrival there by the first available train when Cecil Torrington appeared at the door. He had just been about to start for Manton, but insisted on driving Joan across to Westbridge in his car. It was no trouble whatever, he assured her; and he was most awfully sorry to hear that she had had such bad news. When she had thanked him she hastened away to pack a bag hurriedly, and ten minutes later ran down the stairs, to find him starting his engine.

It was a grey, cold afternoon, and a bitter wind harried the dead leaves beneath the elms of the avenue.

"You will find it warmer if you sit in front," Cecil suggested, as she hesitated beside the car. Mrs. Torrington's maid appeared at that moment with a fur-lined driving coat for Miss Velvin's use, but Joan decided to take the seat beside the driver and declined the coat, with many thanks, on the grounds that Mrs. Torrington might perhaps require it during her absence. She felt that as Cecil had invited her to sit beside him, it would have been ungracious to refuse.

Not until the car had passed through the lodge gates and was humming along the twisting Westbridge road did her hasty preparations for the journey give her time to consider its purpose and its causes. Her mother's telegram had stated simply: "Father dying Westbridge Infirmary," without explanation of any sort. That he should be dying in Westbridge Infirmary instead of at Overbarrow seemed to be token an accident of some sort. She wondered what her mother would do. It seemed to her probable that she would sell the farm, if a buyer could be found. Perhaps she could be persuaded to live in Bristol. This possibility opened up for Joan's imagination vistas of engrossing interest. She

supposed that the sale of the farm would bring in a large sum of money. She wondered how much—and how much lay to her father's account in the bank at Westbridge. Beyond an enquiry as to whether she was warm enough, Cecil, perceiving her lost in mournful reverie, refrained from disturbing her by inconsiderate attempts at conversation. The gentle solicitude with which he asked the question revealed him in a new light to Joan. She thought that, with just that quiet gravity in his face, he was certainly extraordinarily handsome and distinguished-looking. The cool aplomb with which he drove attracted her attention at moments. Although the speed of the car on that winding, narrow road was dangerously fast, she felt that those calm, steady eyes were equal to any emergency. With difficulty she brought her thoughts back to the calamity towards which she was rushing through the chill October afternoon.

At the Red Lion, in a tiny bedroom smothered in the reek of a smoking chimney, Joan found her mother, bonneted and in her out-of-door things, reading a pocket Bible through a long-handled reading-glass. She had recently been crying, and at sight of Joan her eyes filled again with tears. But when she had kissed her, she blew her nose and related with unexpected calmness and matter-of-factness her tragic story. A fortnight and a day before, Velvin had cut the fleshy part of the palm of his left hand with the point of a bill-hook—quite a small and unimportant cut which had bled hardly at all. He had been tidying up the little garden in front of the house, and had continued to work with the wounded hand. That had been on the 29th of September. On the 5th of October he had complained of a stiffness in his jaws and neck which had grown so rapidly worse that on the 7th he had been unable to eat save with the greatest difficulty. Dr. Baxter had been sent for and had, after a day of doubt, ordered him to go at once to Westbridge Infirmary, where the malady had been pronounced to be lock-jaw. The doctors there believed that something in the soil

of the garden had got into the cut and had caused the lock-jaw. Mrs. Velvin was unable to recall what the something in the soil of the garden was, but knew that at the Infirmary her husband had been injected three times. The injections, however, had failed to do any good. The patient was now so bad that for the last three days she had not been allowed to see him. The least excitement, they had told her, brought on the spasms. That morning, while they had renewed their assurances that everything that could be done was being done, they had informed her definitely that there was no hope for the case. She described, anguishingly, the horrors of the spasms, the still more terrible agony of the intervals between them. Then she collapsed for a space into hysterical lamentation. Joan, too, wept, one arm about her mother's neck, picturing her father as she had last seen him, sturdy, active, smiling—a man who had never had a day's sickness within her recollection of him. For a long time they sat before the smouldering little fire in silence, coughing occasionally in the acrid fog that filled the room. Presently Joan went down on her knees before the grate and with a newspaper succeeded in coaxing the fire to a feeble blaze, which died down, however, when she resumed her seat beside her mother. She picked up a little Bible, which lay open at Psalm 16.

"I bought that yesterday," gasped Mrs. Velvin through a sob. "But the print was too small, so I had to get that magnifying-glass."

"The lines are fallen to me in pleasant places," read Joan. "Yea, I have a goodly heritage."

"What will you do, Mother," she asked, "if . . . ?"

"Do?" repeated Mrs. Velvin vaguely.

"I mean . . . you won't keep on the farm, will you?"

"This is no time to talk of such things, Joan. How can I think of such things now? . . . I must do as I think he would wish me to do. If it is God's will, perhaps, I may see him before he goes from me." She rose. "I suppose

it's nearly three o'clock now. Will you come to the Infirmary with me?"

They waited in the draughty hall of the hospital, where a naked gas-jet whined desolately, while the porter departed in search of the Resident Physician. He reappeared several times, indecisive, on the staircase and in the passages that branched from the hall, returned at last to say that there was no change.

"I wish to see the Resident," said Joan, unconvinced.

"He's busy," said the man, sulkily, for Mrs. Velvin's frequent and fruitless visits to the hospital had begun to fatigue his patience. But Joan was not to be so easily put off as her stay-at-home mother.

"I don't care a pin whether he is busy or not," she said peremptorily. "Kindly go at once and say that Miss Velvin wishes to see him as soon as he is disengaged."

The porter went off again, returned, applied himself to a speaking-tube without result, swore under his breath, departed once more, returned again with word that the Resident would come down as soon as he could, and retreated to his cubicle and his newspaper aggrievedly. For a further draughty twenty minutes Joan and her mother waited, and then at last the Resident appeared—a fair, pimply young man in white overalls, who smelt strongly of antiseptics and tobacco. At sight of Joan the irritable frown which had clouded his face as he descended the staircase disappeared, and he assumed hastily a correct and sympathetic professional courtesy. But he was unable to hold out any hope—in tetanus cases, he regretted to say, there was seldom any hope once the malady had reached a stage sufficiently advanced to be recognisable. Death might intervene at any moment. In such cases a speedy death, an uncompleted sentence conveyed, was the greatest mercy.

"And am I not to see him again before he dies?" asked Mrs. Velvin, tearfully. "Am I never to speak to him again?"

The young man glanced at Joan appealingly, as to a judg-

ment of intelligent and enlightened common-sense, and shook his head significantly.

"No, Mother," she urged. "I am sure . . . it is better that we should not see him."

"Better for him. Much better for you," said the Resident gravely.

They returned to the little bedroom at the Red Lion to wait for that merciful release. Twice that evening and three times next day Joan accompanied her mother to the hospital. Half-an-hour after their second visit a hastily-scribbled note from the Resident informed Joan that her father was dead.

§ vii

Joan's impression of the strangely-still thing that lay surrounded by screens in the middle of the long white-washed ward connected it scarcely at all with the cheerful, active, vigorous man whom she had always known as her father. The peacefulness of his face, in which it seemed to her the dawning of a smile, arrested by the coming of Death, still flickered elusively, held no trace of the ghastly struggle which the screens had concealed. There was nothing horrible, nothing formidable, nothing sad to look upon; only that odd, implacable stillness beside which the stillness of the quietest and most rigid living thing that she had ever seen had been a riotous commotion. Joan's attention was distracted too, at that time by her mother's symptoms of threatening hysteria, and afterwards by the necessary preparations for the funeral. It was not until the afternoon of the following day, when the latter practical matters had been attended to, that she realised for the first time with any conviction the fact that her father was dead.

While her mother sat at the little round table of their private sitting-room at the Red Lion, snivelling quietly as she wrote on the black-edged notepaper which she had purchased that morning a long and lamentable account of her

bereavement for the benefit of her eldest sister—who lived at York, and could not, therefore, be reasonably expected to attend the funeral—Joan went to stand at the window and looked out into the twilight of the narrow street, where the widely-spaced lamps already twinkled palely. And as her eyes lost themselves in the hazy perspective of the old, irregularly-built houses her thoughts strayed back through her memories of the dead man, pausing to consider him in some ancient, familiar attitude, or to recall some characteristic mannerism, some trivial, unimportant, habitual action that evoked him, dead, with a greater vividness and actualness than any with which she had seen him living—the invariable clearing of his throat as he creaked down the stairs in the mornings . . . his habit of pulling the lobe of his right ear quickly in face of the unexpected . . . a trick which he had, when talking, of reaching down backways to scratch the calf of his right leg. . . . For the first time she perceived that he had worked with tremendous industry and perseverance and patience. Well . . . now . . . he would rest for ever, poor thing.

Her mind for a little time involved itself in vague speculation as to the hereafter that was the Now for that industrious, persevering, patient soul. The Heaven and the Hell that had once been for Joan such definite, certain fates had long obscured themselves in the mists of the unpractical and unimportant. She still prayed night and morning, kneeling, and with the rapt exterior devoutness of pose which she had borrowed as a child from her mother. But those two brief abstractions from the world were moments entirely dissociated from the rest of her day. It came to her as an astonishment that Heaven and Hell were still things of moment. It came to her as an amazement that for her humdrum, matter-of-fact, simple father the transition from the unknown to the known was then an accomplished fact; all the mysteries and puzzlements solved; all the uncertainties made clear and sure, once and for all. He, that dull,

illiterate, untidy, dirtyish, elderly countryman, was dealing now directly with God and the Heaven of God. Astounding thought. Unconsciously she raised her eyes to a sky that shaded from palest blue to flaming scarlet. That he had gone to Heaven she felt at that moment no doubt. Now that she looked back at him, she believed him incapable of serious sin against God or man or beast.

And yet she felt, with regret, that she had never loved her father. At times, as a child, she had been fond of him, when he had gratified her childish desires by swinging her up on to the back of one of the great farm-horses, or allowing her to drive the hay-rake from his knee, or some other such precious indulgence. He had always represented to her younger imagination, too, the embodiments of physical strength—the strength that lifted great weights with ease, that pulled and pushed and snapped with hands of irresistible might. And in that side of him she had always felt a proud and admiring confidence. But in the main he had always been an obstacle—a difficulty—an opposition that might at any moment assume a tyrannous and overwhelming activity, even if it seldom did. The certainty that her own wishes and in nine cases out of ten those of her mother would run counter to those of her father had always hung like a cloud above the tranquil uneventfulness of her childhood. She had never been able to forget that.

Nor had she ever been able to forget or forgive his unwillingness to send her to St. Angela's, nor his sarcasms, good-humoured but shrewdly mordant, at the expense of her newly-acquired accomplishments and tastes and ambitions and friends. She realised that cold, hard unforgivingness of hers now, as her eyes followed the erratic and lingering passage of a small dingy terrier down the street. She realised that for that long-ago unwillingness and for those faded sarcasms she had always borne the dead man a bitter grudge—a grudge that she saw now as at once perfectly justifiable and intolerably petty and regrettable.

There came to her memory a Sunday afternoon a couple of years before when, irritated beyond endurance by his zestful sucking of his teeth after dinner, she had attacked him with a savage little phrase of rebuke. She saw again his mildly-surprised, mildly-protesting stare and his half-open mouth towards which the forefinger that had been about to supplement the sucking process had stopped half-way in the air. At the thought that perhaps her words had really hurt him through his easy-tempered stoicism her eyes filled with tears. She turned away from the window and, yielding to a sudden pity and tenderness, ran and threw her arms about her mother's neck. Mrs. Velvin abandoned her letter-writing to return the embrace meltingly. For a little time they wept silently with interlocked arms.

"My darling . . . my darling . . . you are all I have now," gasped Mrs. Velvin at length. "You will come home to your poor old mother?"

The heavy footsteps of the Red Lion's slatternly waiting-maid on the stairs, ascending with the lamp, relieved Joan from the necessity of replying to this disturbing and embarrassing question. If there was anything which it was her plain duty to do, it was to return to Overbarrow to keep her mother company in her widowhood. If there was anything which dismayed her heart of hearts it was the thought of going back to the dreary loneliness and monotony from which she had escaped so happily. She patted her mother's arm—the gesture was her father's habitual substitute for difficult words in difficult situations—and rose to her feet as the advance rays of the lamp rose over the top stair and filtered into the dimness of the room.

"We must talk over what it will be best for you to do, Mother," she said, and, the maid appearing now in the doorway, asked that some consoling buttered toast might be sent up with tea. The girl, perceiving that she had been crying, volunteered the information that the crumpets of the confectioner next door were famous in Westbridge. Joan, to

avoid being alone with her mother just then, descended herself with the intention of purchasing four of these desirable comestibles.

§ viii

She was standing in the little fragrant-smelling confectionery, awaiting her turn to be served, when Cecil Torrington, passing the door on his way to the Red Lion, saw her and entered the shop. Her mourning had not yet been delivered, and, as he came towards her, his eyes expressed the question which her sad, eloquent look as she took his hand answered mutely. He, too, perceived at once that she had been crying.

"What are you doing here?" he enquired. "I mean . . . anything very urgent?"

"I want to buy some crumpets for Mother's tea. She is very fond of crumpets. They make very good crumpets here, I believe."

She saw that he was impressed by the sad deadness of her phrases. His air as he looked at her was very gentle and tender.

"When is your mother's tea?"

"Oh . . . in about a quarter of an hour, I suppose."

"A quarter of an hour? Won't it do to get the crumpets then? I mean . . . we can't talk here. I want to talk to you. For a few minutes."

"Very well," said Joan.

They left the shop and walked slowly towards the last orange glow of the frosty sunset, against which the rooftops and chimney-pots cut themselves in blue-black silhouette. Torrington had been commissioned by Mrs. Torrington to assure Joan that she was at liberty to postpone her return to Shalcott until it should be quite convenient for her. Having learned that her father was to be buried the following morning in Stretton cemetery, and that Joan intended to return to Overbarrow to spend at all events a couple of days

there with her mother, he asked abruptly the question which her mother had put to her a few minutes before.

"I suppose your mother will want you at Overbarrow now? Permanently, I mean?"

"I suppose so," replied Joan, hesitatingly. "I am not sure whether Mother will keep on the farm now, though. I think I shall try to persuade her to sell it, and go to live at Bristol—or at all events near Bristol."

"She can hardly expect to manage the farm by herself, can she?"

"Impossible. Mother isn't a bit that sort. Besides, I simply can't think of going back to live at Overbarrow again permanently. I simply can't face it. I don't think it's reasonable of Mother to expect me to bury myself alive up there, miles and miles away from every one and everything. Do you? I suppose you think it odd that I should ask you such a question . . . about a thing that doesn't interest you in the least . . ."

"Oh, but it does interest me quite a good deal, I assure you."

"It's a thing that will have to be decided. I know I shall have a row with Mother about it. It has been worrying me dreadfully for the last couple of days. You can look at it dispassionately . . . I have no one else to advise me, you see . . . and . . ."

The vehemence with which the impulsive appeal had begun ended off wistfully with a glance of entreating helplessness. Torrington chewed the stem of the pipe which he had lighted thoughtfully for some moments before he replied.

"I think your suggestion is a wise one," he said at length. "I think that if your mother can get a decent price for the farm, and if she can live comfortably on her means . . ."

"Oh, yes," said Joan quickly. "Father has left between seven and eight thousand pounds, we know. And then there would be the sale of the farm. She could live quite comfortably on what she will have."

"Well, in that case, I should certainly advise her to sell and go to live . . . you would like to live in Bristol?"

"Well, if she did that," said Joan, "I should like to stay on with the children when Mrs. Torrington moves into Clifton. I should be quite near Mother. I could see her often."

"Oh. You would still look after Jimty and Millicent?"

"Of course Jimty is to go to school after Christmas, I know. But if Mrs. Torrington approved I should like very much to look after Millicent for a little while longer."

"I am sure she will be only too glad to have you," said the young man formally.

They had reached the outskirts of the little town, and beneath the last lamp Joan halted.

"I suppose I must go back now. But I feel much more cheerful than I did when you first saw me. I had worked myself up into believing that I was a hateful, selfish, cold-blooded little beast for not wanting to go back to Overbarrow with Mother. But really . . . I know I should never be able to stand it . . . now. How is Marjory? Have you seen her since I left Shalcott?"

"Yes. She sent you and your mother all sorts of kind messages. She is coming across to Shalcott specially to see you as soon as you get back."

"What a good, darling old thing she is," murmured Joan gratefully. Torrington knocked the ashes out of his pipe against the lamp-post, carefully.

"She is," he said with quiet conviction. "I have never known any one quite like Marjory."

The deliberation of the remark caused Joan to look curiously into his face, conscious that her own was indistinct in the shadow of her hat. He had spoken the words slowly and gravely, as if he enunciated a profession of faith of which he had felt the need and which his voice had stressed intentionally, as if to challenge her attention to it. Her instinct told her in a flash that the subject which he desired to talk to her about, the subject which he had come

to Westbridge that afternoon to discuss with her, was really Marjory. The delivery of Mrs. Torrington's message had been merely a pretext. It was not solicitude with regard to her plans that had postponed the purchase of the crumpets. He wanted to talk about Marjory. A little piqued by the exclusiveness of his solemn prelude, she waited in the shadow of her hat to hear what he had to say and why he wanted to say it to her.

"I suppose," he said, after a moment, "that you really do want to come back to Shalcott?"

"Of course," said Joan, surprised but divining now at once the probable drift of the conversation. "I am most awfully happy there. And if Mrs. Torrington thinks that I am giving satisfaction . . ."

"Oh, that, of course," interrupted Cecil a little impatiently. "Of course you are giving satisfaction . . . to her."

"To *her*?" repeated Joan. "Don't *you* wish me to go back?"

"No, I don't. Probably that sounds abominably rude and ungracious . . . but, well . . . the plain and simple truth always does, doesn't it? I regret very much now that I suggested that you should take Miss Payne's place. It was an extremely absurd and foolish suggestion on my part. The only thing I can say now, however, is that I regret it very much, and that I hope you will not come back to Shalcott."

"It is very kind of you to tell me so, so frankly, if you feel like that about it," said Joan, trying to suppress the tremor in her voice. The tears that she had dried so lately welled up again in her eyes. "I haven't the least idea how I have offended you, Mr. Torrington, I'm sure."

Torrington caught the gleam of wet eyelashes in the lamplight. "Oh, offended . . ." he said, with the gruffness of the male in face of uncomfortable tears.

She turned away from the lamp and they began to retrace slowly their steps towards the Red Lion. A small hurrying

figure came towards them in the dusk, peered at Joan as he made way for them on the narrow footpath, raised his hat hastily, and passed unheeded. It was Mr. Popplewhite, hastening home from the Bank to tea and the repair of a punctured bicycle tyre. He flitted on into the dimness with his little brisk legs, looking back over his shoulder, all a-flutter from the encounter.

"It is an extremely difficult thing to say," said Cecil. "It is a thing which you will probably resent very much indeed, and which I should much rather not say. But I want to dissuade you from returning to Shalcott if I can, and I suppose I must give you a reason."

"Don't," said Joan coldly, "if you would rather not. It isn't in the least necessary. It is quite sufficient that you don't wish to have me in your own house. I shouldn't think of forcing myself on you. I shouldn't think of going back under the circumstances—"

"If your heart is set on governessing—I can't think why it should be—but if it is, there ought to be very little difficulty in finding a job every bit as good somewhere else. I am sure my stepmother and Mrs. Holthurst and Marjory will be only too delighted to help you in any possible way."

"Thank you," snapped Joan frostily. "I can do anything that is necessary for myself. Certainly I want no assistance from Marjory. I know that this . . . this sudden desire to get rid of me is all Marjory's doing."

"I assure you you are quite mistaken."

"I am not," she persisted peevishly. "I know. I know that Marjory has changed towards me ever since I went to Shalcott. And I know why, too. All because she has got some ridiculous ideas into her head about me."

"Really, I assure you you are quite wrong," urged Cecil with languid impatience. "Marjory has never spoken of you to me or to any one in my hearing otherwise than in the most admiring and affectionate way. In fact, her admiration and affection for you are, I confess, at times even a

little wearisome. I assure you you are quite wrong in that theory of yours."

Joan stopped abruptly and wheeled to face him.

"Then why do you wish me not to go back?" she demanded.

Torrington showed his regular, white teeth, amused by her imperiousness. "I had hoped that you had consented to dispense with awkward explanations, Miss Velvin."

"Well, I certainly must say I think some explanation is due to me," said Joan haughtily, . . . "even if I am only a governess."

The fanlight of the Red Lion's hall-door was now in sight. Torrington set his face westwards again, where the glory of the sunset had paled to liquid, tremulous green. "Very well," he said curtly. "Let us walk back to that lamp again, and you shall have your explanation."

"I'm afraid Mother won't have her crumpets for tea," said Joan, smiling faintly. "Perhaps it's all the better. She always eats too many. And they always give her indigestion. And indigestion makes her as cross as two sticks."

Cecil laughed and, closing up to her, slipped his arm through hers before she could prevent him. She began a movement to release herself, but at once abandoned it. Why should she put him away from her? Why should she affect a silly prudishness? A delicious thrill pervaded her; the thrill of unexpected adventure in the dusk, the thrill of what one facet of her brain reflected as rather a high old lark, the thrill of something else, something stronger and more enveloping and more penetrating than that lighter emotion, something that swept her into a reckless, defiant surrender of herself to that masterfully intrusive, possessive arm. She had felt that particular sensation once before, and once only, when he had touched her as he turned over her music that afternoon up at Overbarrow. He, and he only, and the touch of him, could set her a-quiver just in that delicious, reckless way. Whatever he was, whatever he did, he only

could give her that strange craving to merge her will and all her being in his. Why should she put him away from her? Why should she not take the hour the grudging gods had given her?

They walked on for a little way so, close together, so that her rounded hip brushed his angular one at each step. In the dusk, divining that he was watching her face, her lips parted in a smile. Their eyes met.

"The fact is, Joan of Overbarrow," he said with a gentleness that was a caress, "the fact is, I am growing much too fond of you."

"There is no great harm in being fond of a person," said Joan demurely.

"All depends on the person—and the way one is fond of the person—and whether the person who is fond of the person is engaged to another person—and a lot of things like that, you see. Now, if you were different, and if I were fond of you in a different way . . . well . . . it would be different. Nothing like vivid and lucid expression, is there, when one has an unusually brilliant and original thought to distribute."

"How are you fond of me, then? After all, there is only one way . . ."

"I'm afraid not."

"I want to know something, truthfully," said Joan, when a cooing railway-porter, wheeling a tearful baby in a mail-cart, and followed by a parcel-laden wife, had overtaken them and passed on ahead out of earshot.

"An unreasonable desire . . . but let us try if we cannot gratify it."

"Are you fond of Marjory . . . I mean, really fond of her?"

"Very."

"Fonder . . . fonder than you are of me?"

"Yes. In some ways."

"And in others . . . ?"

"In others, I suppose I am fonder of you. I am fonder of you in some ways than I have ever been of any one else . . . so far . . . and it's just the same with Marjory. Sort of water-tight compartment business with me; I don't get fearfully fond of any one with the whole of me. . . . But a good deal of me is pretty fearfully fond of you for some reason."

"Well," laughed Joan happily, "I can bear it, I think."

"Ah. That is very sweet of you. But that's just the difficulty, candid Joan. If this were a perfect world, and if one could always control one's emotions to a nicety, so that they never carried one too far. . . ."

"I will help you to control yours, Mr. Torrington," said Joan primly. She withdrew her arm from his. "But please don't drive me away from Shalcott . . . just because you like me a little. . . ."

"Very well," laughed Torrington. "But . . . I've warned you, mind. And—about Marjory. . . . I'm quite serious about Marjory. Please believe that. I'm not lyrical or rapturous about her . . . but I'm going to marry her in a few months because she's the only girl I have known whom I have wanted to marry . . . and I want to play the game with her, because she's such a topping little sportsman. . . . See?"

"Then I hope you will give up Miss Letty Blair?" said Joan severely.

Cecil frowned. "I presume I may thank Edna for that little piece of good advice?"

"That is not the important point. The important thing is that you should have nothing more to do with her."

"I quite agree," he said with grim politeness. "I don't intend to."

"I am very glad to hear it. And now I really must go back. Poor mother is probably whimpering for her tea."

"Then . . . you understand? We must be quite, quite good, little Joan."

"Quite, quite good, Mr. Torrington."

At the door of the confectionary he left her. When she had decided upon the day of her return to Shalcott the car would go up to Overbarrow for her. The chauffeur would drive the car. He was an excellent driver, Cecil assured her. Joan thanked him and hurried into the shop to make her purchase.

In the little sitting-room of the Red Lion she found her mother in a state of gloomy peevishness, examining the mourning garments, which had just been delivered in three large boxes.

"Where have you been, child?" she asked sharply.

"Buying crumpets for your tea, Mother. I have given them to the girl to toast. Tea will come up in a few minutes."

Mrs. Velvin's peevishness brightened into a solemn cheerfulness. As Joan had foreseen, she ate two crumpets and had an extremely bad attack of indigestion during the night.

§ ix

The funeral was a gratifying success. The cortège was joined along the road from Westbridge by a number of traps and by the time it reached Stretton had already attained respectable proportions. At the head of the Church Steps, where the coffin was taken from the hearse to be carried on the shoulders of six stalwart farmers for the remainder of the journey to the cemetery, a little crowd awaited its coming and followed it to the churchyard. Prominent amongst these more local mourners was the Squire himself—in memory of sundry dealings in stock which he had had with the dead man. Mr. Clements, too, was conspicuous, now walking once more on two sound legs. Of the six coffin-bearers two were Caleb Purney and his father, the tallest and broadest men in the procession. At the hollow clump and rattle of the first shovelfuls of earth upon the lid of the coffin, Mrs. Velvin emitted a passionate wail and was led away

beneath the trees by Joan and the landlady of the White Horse Hotel, who in that hour of trial showed herself eager to forget the estrangement of many years. The Vicar read the Burial Service with affecting emotion and afterwards spoke some carefully-selected words of comfort to Mrs. Velvin and Joan with a most beautiful Oxford accent. Joan, looking slighter and more delicately fair in her mourning, won the admiration of all present by her tenderness towards her mother. The immense Caleb Purney, leaning against an ancient elm, gazed at her with his china-blue eyes so noticeably as to excite many nudges and winks.

The governess-cart, bearing Amy Lidgett as well as Mrs. Velvin and Joan—for Amy had insisted upon attending the funeral and Overbarrow had been left for the morning to the guard of locks and bolts—passed the Purneys at the top of White Horse Hill. Perceiving that the elder man desired to speak to her, Mrs. Velvin asked Joan, who was driving, to stop. She complied, unwillingly.

“I thought o’ goin’ over your way to-morrow or nex’ day,” said Purney, “in case there was anythin’ we could help you with.”

His pale, fixed eyes wandered from Mrs. Velvin’s face to Joan’s curiously. “I suppose this gal o’ yours’ll be stayin’ home with you now, eh?”

“I hope so, indeed,” said Mrs. Velvin, whose ready tears oozed afresh at every attempt at speech. “It will be very kind of you to come and see us. I’m sure we shall be only too glad of your advice, now that my poor, dear man is gone. . . .”

She wept copiously. Purney watched her with cold curiosity. His son, to whom Joan had presented her back carefully, turned away and lounged on ahead along the track towards Pluckharrow.

“Very well, then. I’ll go over to-morrow evenin’ after tea,” said Purney. But Mrs. Velvin insisted that he should tea at Overbarrow, and held out a grateful hand to him.

Joan, impatiently, touched the pony with the whip and ended the incident curtly. The last person in the world whom she desired to see at Overbarrow was this cunning-eyed, sneering-lipped old curmudgeon or his loutish son.

"I don't see how you can manage the farm, unless you get a reliable man as bailiff," said Joan that night, as they sat in the dining-room after supper before a cheerfully-crackling fire of fir plucks. "You must have some man always on the spot to look after the work-people and keep them at it. And a good reliable man is very hard to get, and very expensive to keep."

"I must only do my best," gasped Mrs. Velvin, "with God's help. I wouldn't see the farm that he gave up his whole life to pass into the hands of strangers for anything in the world. Perhaps Mr. Purney will be able to recommend us a good man."

"I don't like Mr. Purney, Mother," said Joan, after a silence. "I don't like that cunning, leering way he has of looking at you. I wish, if you want to take any one's advice, that you would go to some one else. There are lots of old friends of Pater's . . . Mr. Urcher . . . or Mr. Daunsey . . . either of them would be only too glad to do anything for you. But I think far-and-away the best thing for you to do is to sell the farm. . . ."

"Where should I live, then?"

"In Bristol."

That the idea of residing in Bristol, where she still had many friends, appealed to Mrs. Velvin *per se* was apparent. But hourly her conception of the keeping on of the farm as a duty to the memory of her husband hardened itself to a more rigid obduracy. The counsel of the Purneys, who both came to Overbarrow the following evening, was that she should do so, since they saw no reason why, with a good, practical bailiff, the farm could not be managed by her successfully and remuneratively. Their confident and stolid support crystallised Mrs. Velvin's resolution to rocky deter-

mination. After that she refused to argue further about the matter.

Joan, who had not condescended to appear during the Purneys' visit and had occupied herself in her own bedroom with the composition of a letter to Mrs. Torrington announcing her wish to return the next day but one, displayed unconcealed impatience in regard to the deliberations whose murmur had risen to her through the drawing-room ceiling for nearly two hours.

"Well," said her mother, with just reproach, "if you had so much to say against the opinion of two experienced men like Mr. Purney and his son, why did you shut yourself up in your room instead of coming down to say it to their faces? But you don't take enough interest in Overbarrow or in me or in your dear father's memory to . . ."

"Oh, for heaven's sake don't start crying, Mother," said Joan irritably. "Let us talk sensibly without crying about it. There's no use . . ."

"You hard-hearted girl!" wailed Mrs. Velvin. "Oh . . . you cold, hard-hearted, bad girl . . . to speak to me like that . . . You will repent it, Joan. Mark my words, you will be sorry one day for the way you are treating me."

"Treating you, Mother?"

"Yes. I know. You haven't an atom of affection for me or for the place or for anything in the world . . . except for gratifying your own vanity. You are a bad, selfish, cruel girl. . . . You will be sorry for it. You will be sorry for it."

Suffocated by her tears, Mrs. Velvin waddled out of the room, and ascending to her bedroom, shut the door upon her wounded heart. Joan sat for an hour before a dying fire, listening to the solemn beat of the old clock in the passage and the moan of the October night-wind in the creaking beeches, and having come to the conclusion that her mother's accusations were only too well founded, tore up the letter to Mrs. Torrington when she went upstairs to her room. As she lay

in the darkness, listening to the desolate blasts of the gale sweeping across the vast flat expanse of the Plain from the south-west, all the loneliness and dreariness of the place assailed her troubled soul. But it was her duty to bear it, to stay on and be a comfort and help to her mother.

Next morning she descended to breakfast with these good resolutions, to learn from Amy Lidgett that it was Mrs. Velvin's purpose not to see her before she left the house.

"But you'll bide here, Miss Joan?" said Amy. "You won't leave Missus? Your place is by her, now."

"Nonsense," said Joan angrily, swallowed her breakfast hastily, and set off immediately afterwards to Stretton to send a wire to Mrs. Torrington announcing her return to Shalcott that afternoon. A reply wire reached the farm before midday to say that the car would call there for her at two o'clock.

At a quarter past two Mrs. Velvin opened her bedroom door and called Amy to the foot of the stairs. "Has Miss Joan gone?" she asked, knowing that she had.

"Yes'm. Gone in the moty-car."

Mrs. Velvin stood for a moment in stony silence. "Go up the Leaze Coombe, Amy," she said at length, "and send young Henry Meade to me. He's ploughing up there to-day."

CHAPTER IX

§ i

HOWEVER cold the speeding upon her journey to Shalcott, nothing could have been warmer or more consoling than her reception upon her arrival there. The children welcomed her boisterously, and then, abashed a little by her mourning, clung to her affectionately. Mrs. Torrington, who was confined to the house by a slight chill, and had not been able to hunt that day, was unfeignedly glad to see her. The butler—a butler of the old school, who bore an amazing resemblance to Beerbohm Tree and who had from the first adopted towards Joan a paternally-protecting benevolence—himself opened the front door with such unusual promptness upon the arrival of the car that Joan suspected that he had been lurking in the hall especially for the purpose.

“Very pleased to see you back, miss, I’m sure. Though the awspices isn’t what they might be, as every one in the house is sorry to hear. You look delikit, miss. Let me get you a glass of port-wine.”

The maids, too, smiled amicably, and Cecil’s own man, Purefoy, wished her good afternoon on the stairs with respectful *empressement*. When Joan reached her pretty, airy bedroom, with its sparkling fire and its view of the Cotswolds across the trees of the park, a throb of pleasure and physical well-being raised up her heart from the mist of regret and uneasiness which had clouded it during the drive from Overbarrow. Indeed, from that moment she forgot Overbarrow and her mother altogether for several days.

She had arranged to take the children for a walk as soon as her unpacking had been accomplished. But the task

proved such a brief one that the thought of the white bathroom and unlimited supplies of hot water at the end of the corridor tempted her. The bathroom of the Red Lion at Westbridge had been a dismaying place, and the old hip-bath at Overbarrow had appeared woefully inadequate. She could easily spare ten minutes for a really satisfactory tub. Slipping into a dressing-gown, she hurried along the corridor and for nearly a quarter of an hour splashed and wallowed in luxurious abandonment.

And then, as she rose like Anadyomene from the waves and prepared to step on to the bath-mat, to her stupefaction the door of the bathroom opened and Mr. James Torrington, attired in a dressing-gown of sombre purple with saffron facings and girdle, and clasping the paraphernalia of the bath to his bosom, walked into the apartment. For a fraction of a second his fishy eyes surveyed the whiteness of Joan's gleaming curves. Then she uttered a faint squawk, and with great presence of mind, if with little dignity, flopped down into the water again.

"Good heavens!" she ejaculated.

The elderly man executed an abrupt *volte-face*, and with the apology, "Sorry, sorry," made a hasty exit from the room. From the landing he apologised lavishly and, it seemed to Joan, at inconvenient length.

"Please go away," she cried.

"Going, going," he replied, and padded away along the corridor. Joan sprang from the bath, rushed to the door, locked it, and then laughed a little irrepressible laugh that held not nearly so much indignation as she felt it ought to have done. Of course it had been ridiculously careless of her not to lock the door. But Mrs. Torrington had made no mention of her brother-in-law's presence in the house, nor had either of the children, and Joan had taken it for granted that at that hour of the day that part of the house was deserted. She frowned, laughed again as Mr. Torrington's expression recurred to her, wondered whether she had better retail the

incident to Mrs. Torrington or not, and speculated hotly as to the behaviour most becoming when she and Mr. Torrington next came face to face.

As she dressed she decided upon silence as to the incident as the most prudent course. She possessed now a sufficiently intimate acquaintance with Mrs. Torrington's sense of humour to feel sure that any confidence to her upon the subject would be circulated—without loss of piquancy in the process—amongst her friends. The mere thought that Cecil Torrington might learn of the episode crimsoned her cheeks. She was well acquainted, too, with James Torrington's prudishness and primness, which at all times provided a theme for pleasant extravagance to the sprightly imagination of his sister-in-law. It seemed quite improbable that he would divulge his share in the affair—unless to anticipate by confession some resentful communications on Joan's part to Mrs. Torrington. The simplest and wisest course was to present to him at their next encounter a front of calm and oblivious friendliness. Thus would any possible anxieties of his be allayed, and the unfortunate incident closed without further humiliation.

The sagacity of her speculations as to the offender's nervousness became clear to her when, on her way to the school-room, where the children awaited her, he emerged—arrayed with conventional completeness, although he had not had time to bathe in the interval—from the bedroom door, and stopped her with an appealing "Miss Velvin . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Torrington?" she said, turning calmly to him.

"I must offer you a thousand apologies, my dear young lady," he said suavely, yet with an underlying eagerness. "I . . . I . . . really, I shall never forgive myself."

"It was entirely my fault, Mr. Torrington," said Joan, conscious that despite her best efforts her cheeks were going crimson again. "Please never make any allusion to it again."

"On that you may rely implicitly," said the elderly man, obviously deeply relieved.

Joan left him standing at the door of his bedroom, gazing after her lithe, flowing curves fishily. When she turned the corner of the corridor she laughed again, merrily. The poor, funny old fellow. What a shock for him. . . .

§ ii

From the children in the course of their walk in the park she learned that not merely James Torrington was the guest of Shalcott at that moment, but that Mr. Lomax had arrived there the preceding day for the week-end and that Marjory Holthurst had slept there the preceding night, the meet that morning having been at Burton Chancey Cross Roads, practically at the avenue gates. Whether Marjory would return to Shalcott that afternoon was to depend, it appeared, upon the line of the run and its ending-place. But both Mr. Torrington and Mr. Lomax were to remain until Monday morning. Jimty, who detested his uncle James cordially, gave Joan a detailed description of that dyspeptic gentleman's peculiarities of dietary and of a strange apparatus called an "Exerciser" which he had brought with him and erected in his bedroom. Of this mysterious engine he made use regularly four times a day, according to his own proud boast, for a period of ten minutes at a time. Jimty supposed that he was trying to develop muscles, but appeared sceptical as to his ever possessing such manly things, and doubtful as to the use which he would make of them if he did.

"He eats nothing but fish and dry toast," he said contemptuously. "And he has some special kind of water in a bottle of his own."

"Mother says he's an old crank," supplemented Millicent. "What does crank mean, Velvets?"

"Oh . . . a person with queer ideas about things," said Joan abstractedly. "Mr. Lomax has gone hunting to-day, then?"

"Yes. On one of Cecil's horses."

"Hello!" said the boy, pointing towards the curving line

of the avenue elms across the haze of the twilight. "There's Cecil and Miss Holthurst coming back."

"There are," corrected Joan, mechanically.

"Oh, hang!" exclaimed the boy. "Let's cut across and meet them."

As he spoke a third equestrian passed through the lodges, and a few moments later overtook the other two. In the failing light Joan and her charges moved diagonally across the grass to intercept the returning party. Their chatter and laughter reached her ears on the still, mild air. They seemed in high spirits; Marjory's staccato bark punctuated the hearty bass of the merry Mr. Lomax and the quieter, clearer laugh of the third member of the cavalcade that was for Joan the most musical sound that the whole universe held. He was the first to detect her advance, and she heard distinctly, nearly a quarter of a mile away, his voice say:

"Ah. Joan of Overbarrow has come back to us, then."

Marjory wheeled her horse and came cantering across the grass, followed by the two men. The two parties met beneath an elaborately gnarled and twisted oak, an encounter of Meissonier. To Joan the three horses and their riders were in silhouette beneath the wide-spreading lower branches of the oak, against a sunset of primrose striped and streaked fantastically by horizontal lines of indigo cloud, and fringed by the dusk-veiled park with its fading distances and its ancient, romantic timber.

For Joan, as for most people, there were some scenes, some settings of thoughts and sensations, more or less frequently recurring and lying just in that vague borderland between imagination and memory; pictures familiar yet indefinite, in which moved people whose identity remained always doubtful but whom she seemed always on the point of recognising. From her childhood she had seen so and loved and sometimes wondered a little about just such a

landscape as the park at Shalcott—wide, sweeping levels of rich, timbered grassland receding to mysterious distances. No doubt the genesis of the picture had been her mother's souvenirs of that long-ago half-holiday excursion to Langley Hall. No doubt her adolescent reveries as to that romantic great-great-grandmother had lost her thoughts countless times in such surroundings. The translation of her dream-picture into physical actuality, the three mounted figures standing out against the melodramatic sunset sky, gave her the sensation of discovery, of solution, of explanation. That meeting in that scene had happened before and would happen again, something assured her. For a moment a slight dizziness obscured her thoughts. Then Marjory's voice brought her back abruptly to the real and the commonplace.

As tea-time was at hand the whole party moved slowly towards the house, the children trotting on ahead beside the men. Walking with a hand resting on Marjory's skirt, Joan recalled repentantly the suspicions which had prompted the accusations made so hastily and foolishly to Cecil Torrington that afternoon earlier in the week at Westbridge. She found in Marjory's common-sense frank support in and sympathy with her decision against remaining at Overbarrow and sincere pleasure in her return to Shalcott.

"After all, Old Cockolorum, you've only got one life to live, and you'll only be nineteen once. It isn't violently exciting here, I suppose. But at all events you do see human beings occasionally. And it isn't a whole day's march from Manton. We can have a pow-wow sometimes. When Edna moves to Clifton you should certainly make another attempt to persuade your mother to go to live in Bristol. I loved Overbarrow that day in the sunshine. But the thought of it at night, in the winter, hidden away up there in that dark little wood, and so far away from everything . . . well . . . it gives me the blues. Suppose your mother got ill suddenly. She has only that ancient female of yours . . . I forget her name . . . to look after her. You look such a dear in those

black things, Joan. I suppose I ought not to say that. But you do. They make me want to kiss you."

Their talk drifted to the new house in Clifton, to the probability of Mrs. Torrington's re-marriage—now, it appeared, a practical certainty—and to the peculiarities of Mr. James Torrington. For an instant Joan was tempted to relate the incident of the bathroom, but forbore for that time, lest the loyalty of feminine friendship should succumb to the temptations of engaged expansiveness.

"You know, of course, that he's a spook-collector," said Marjory. "He loves 'em. He had got quite a well-known one in his own house, and he swears that he has seen it twice himself . . . a young man in a long white robe . . . you know the sort of thing. Get him to tell you about it. He'll love to."

"Perhaps," said Joan, "the thing he has in his room is an exorciser." She laughed, though not very sincerely, at her little pleasantry in the dim light of the avenue along which they were now proceeding. She had always been much more amused by ghosts and ghost-stories by daylight than after dusk, and was prone, beyond her self-control, to sudden shynings and panics of fancy in dark, lonely places. But she added, with scoffing bravery: "How ridiculous!" Then she laughed at her own thought, and added in a blurt: "He saw another spook this afternoon."

The story of the bathroom diverted Marjory so enormously that before she ended it Joan repented of having begun it. Her friend, however, made the most solemn promises of secrecy.

"Much better luck than the old frump deserved," was her comment. "Why didn't you shy a wet sponge at him?"

"There wasn't time," laughed Joan. "I was too busy getting under cover. Besides, I might have ruined his beautiful dressing-gown. Purple, my dear, with bright yellow facings and things. And his eyes standing out of his head. I don't suppose he ever saw a ghost so . . . *décolletée* before."

At tea, which Joan attended in the library by special invitation, Marjory maliciously manœuvred James Torrington into the corner by a window in which she and Joan had been sitting.

"Miss Velvin is most frightfully interested in your ghost-story, Mr. Torrington," she said. "Is it a she-ghost or a he-ghost?"

"A gentleman-ghost," replied the brewer, playful with these playful maids. "A handsome young man named Pericho, who murdered his elder brother in order to obtain the family estates."

"When did he do that? Recently, or long ago?"

"At the end of the eighteenth century. In the year seventeen hundred and ninety-three, to be exact."

"In the house in which you are living now?"

"Yes. I have seen him myself on two occasions, Miss Velvin. In the same passage, too, though not in precisely the same spot."

"What is he like?" asked Joan, moved to serious curiosity.

"A young, fair, rather pale man, with a longish face, dressed in a long grey cloak."

"How thrilling. How long do you see him for?"

"On the first occasion for an instant . . . on the second occasion for a little longer. I should say perhaps the tenth part of a second. It is believed that he killed his brother in that very passage, one night when he had taken too much wine. The body was never found. It was a most interesting case. I have an account of the inquiry which the relatives set on foot. . . . If you take an interest in these matters, Miss Velvin, perhaps some day you would like to read it."

"I love things of that sort," declared Joan. "I should love to read it."

Mr. Torrington, mounted now on his pet hobby-horse, began a methodical résumé of the affair, to which Joan listened with the most flattering absorption. Marjory left them, to adjourn to the billiard-room with Cecil. Thither Mrs. Tor-

rington followed presently with the gay and enamoured Mr. Lomax. Joan glanced towards Jimty and Millicent, whom she observed consulting furtively, with oblique reconnoitings of the now unguarded cake-stand.

"Some mischief afoot?" smiled James Torrington, indulgently, following her eyes.

"I am sure you want to go to the billiard-room, Mr. Torrington," said Joan, rising. "I must take these young people away and find them something improving to do."

"I have not heard Millicent sing yet," said Torrington. "I understand that under your tuition she has developed quite a voice. Let us go to the drawing-rooms. Billiards has always seemed to me an extremely tiresome game to watch."

When Millicent had rendered two artless ballads in her wavering, birdlike way, Joan sang one of Mr. Clements's songs, and afterwards, by special request, Lassen's *All Souls' Day*. Crumpled up in a huge chair, his crossed spindle legs embedded in their yielding seat, one hand shading his eyes, her audience gazed across the room at her slender figure with its golden chevelure whose sheen detached itself in blonde silkiness against the folds of the shadowed curtains beyond the piano. Jimty, bored to extinction, escaped presently to the schoolroom to his beloved drawing. Millicent amused herself by investigating the contents of her mother's bag, discovered abandoned in a window-seat.

"I am no musician, but I am very fond of a little quiet music," said Mr. Torrington, when Joan left the piano. "It is a very delightful relaxation. You sing most charmingly."

"It is very kind of you to say so," said Joan, considering him attentively. She had made another conquest; this crabbed elderly man had yielded to her, as every man whom she had encountered during the past two years had done. His desire to be agreeable to her was unmistakable, and the formality of his phrases was underlined by an ingratiating stress that, if it was not familiarity, plainly desired to lead

to it. He was certainly an ugly old man—his age she knew to be sixty-seven, for he had been many years his dead brother's senior. Sixty-seven was, of course, an almost impossible age, and his ugliness, too, possessed a curious quality of smugly-concealed unpleasantness—something that twisted in his smile and looked out of the corners of his dead, flaccid eyes. Still . . . he was the senior partner of the firm, immensely wealthy, and a bachelor . . . and her instinct told her that the incident of the bathroom had at least done nothing to diminish his interest in her. When, cautiously, because of the hovering Millicent, he proposed that he should join the children in the course of their before-breakfast walk next morning, somewhere near the lake, Joan felt no surprise whatever, and made no show of any, but judged fit to agree to the proposal as a perfectly natural avuncular desire. As she prepared to retreat to the schoolroom he returned once more, with that unpleasant twisted smile of his, to the episode of the afternoon.

"I know, of course, that any allusion to my stupidity is strictly forbidden," he said oilily, "but I think I ought to explain how I came to make that unfortunate intrusion—perhaps you will permit me to say, unfortunate on one side only. . . ."

Joan blushed faintly. For an instant, as his eyes swept over her, she felt that his glance undressed her. He was certainly a very detestable but rather a foolish old man. A curious, slimy glitter, fixed and avid, glazed his pupils. Joan averted her eyes as from something obscene.

"I think I asked you to forget that incident, Mr. Torrington," she said icily. "Perhaps we shall meet you to-morrow morning, then, if it is fine."

He shambled to open the door for her, and she passed out coldly. He returned slowly to the fire, and standing with one square-toed shoe on the fender, gazed reflectively into the blaze.

§ iii

But he was not to meet Joan by the lake next morning, though he did indeed catch a distant and hasty glimpse of her.

Marjory came into Joan's room about ten o'clock that night with two interesting items of information. Mrs. Torrington had formally announced to Cecil and to her brother-in-law her engagement to Mr. Lomax. The tidings had surprised no one. Mr. Lomax had been the most favoured of Mrs. Torrington's many admirers for several years, was extremely well-off, and, Marjory considered, weak as water but a well-meaning old cabbage. There being no apparent obstacle to the immediate consummation of this happy union, it was understood that it was to take place almost immediately. Mrs. Torrington's move to Clifton would probably be hastened somewhat in view of this alteration in her plans. It seemed likely that it would take place now early in November, if the new house was ready for her reception by then.

"But that is not really what I have burst in on you to tell you," said Marjory. "I suppose you have a habit? A riding habit?"

Joan shook her head.

"Then Edna must lend you one of hers. I'm sure she will. Cecil and I want you to come out for a gallop to-morrow morning before breakfast . . . before sunrise. We want to ride into the dawn. Are you game for a six-o'clock start?"

"Rather!" said Joan ecstatically. "Oh, how kind of you to think of it, Marjory. You are a brick. Do you think Mrs. Torrington will mind lending me a habit? Won't she think it rather cheek?"

"Not she," declared Marjory. "Besides, what does it matter if she does? Edna would lend any one anything to-night, except her darling Francis. I'll go and see her about it straightway."

She returned ten minutes later with a variety of borrowed garments which fitted Joan quite sufficiently well for six o'clock in the morning. Joan kissed her fondly as they said good-night in the corridor. How could she ever have thought, or even said, those stupid, horrid, suspicious things about her? What a big, strong, generous character Marjory's was in comparison with her own petty, spiteful distrustfulness. She resolved to strive for greater nobility in herself, greater faith in that of others. She desired greatly to feel bigly and largely and generously about people.

As seven o'clock was the hour at which she was usually called, as a measure of precaution she unearthed from a drawer the alarm-clock which she had purchased in her first zealous eagerness to give satisfaction by exact punctuality. She set it for half-past five, and placed it beside her pillow in her basin. The precaution, however, proved quite unnecessary. She awoke with a start at twenty-nine minutes past five, and was out of bed and into her stockings when the alarm-clock went off with volcanic clamour. At a quarter to six she was dressed and, issuing hastily from her door, met Marjory and Cecil Torrington in the corridor.

"You've lost me half-a-crown," laughed Marjory. "I bet Cecil we should have to drag you out of bed."

"Mr. Torrington has evidently more confidence in my early-rising powers," replied Joan gaily.

"I have had no confidence in anything for many years," said the young man. "Not, indeed, since a worthy lady named Susan, whose affection I had regarded as inexhaustible, failed me utterly and without warning."

"Susan?" repeated Marjory. "I've never heard of Susan before."

"She was much before your time, my dear Marjory."

"Then she must have been a very early flame."

"Very. I became attached to her the day I was born."

The girls laughed. The humourist bowed his acknowledgments. "Thank you," he said gratefully. "I knew we

should get there some time. If we are not more careful we shall awaken my dear Uncle James."

They halted for a moment at a door outside which reposed two pairs of square-toed boots, and through which issued a brazen, mugient blare, not unlike the lowing of a solitary and melancholy cow.

"I am no musician," quoted Joan reminiscently. "But I am very fond of a little quiet music."

"Who is the author?" smiled Torrington, amused.

Joan pointed towards the invisible performer and, stifling their laughter, they went on their way to the stables, whose doors and windows were sharp-edged rectangles of orange brilliance cut out of the opaque darkness of the dying night.

Joan found to her delight that she was to ride a plucky little brown mare on which she had often cast envious eyes. Before Cecil swung himself into his saddle his glance rested for a moment on her as she asserted control over her somewhat fidgety mount. Her seat was perhaps a little conscious, her hands perhaps a little heavy, judged by the standard of Marjory's, which he considered the most perfect seat and hands woman had ever possessed. But he recalled the fact that Joan had not been on a horse for something over two years, and, catching Marjory's eye as he settled himself in his saddle, he nodded the carefully-bestowed approval of the connoisseur. Marjory, who had pleaded for the brown mare for Joan—a favour somewhat unwillingly conceded—smiled her gratification.

Beyond the stable-yard all was a still, cold, dead blackness above which the stars glittered chillily and the moon in her first quarter was ringed with a bronze halo. But as they left the avenue and struck off eastwards across the grass, the blackness infused itself with ghostly grey. They put their horses to a trot, Cecil silent, Marjory chatting volubly, Joan, whose stirrup was too short, replying in somewhat uncomfortable monosyllables. The air was piercingly chill, too,

for some time she regretted that she had not risen earlier to make herself a cup of tea over her spirit-lamp.

Sensibly rather than visibly each instant that encroaching grey paled and the night, dissolved into broken, fugitive wisps of darkness, melted into a lugubrious luminosity from which dense, surging wreaths of mist seemed to writhe downwards to cover the earth. In the east the lower fringe of the sky tinged itself with a duskiness that was no longer grey and that crept up the heavens as if before the breath of a vast, silent wind. Joan glanced at Cecil, and discovered that now she could make out his face, a minute before an indefinite blur, and that he was looking critically at her across Marjory's horse.

"That leather's a bit too short, isn't it, Miss Velvin? We'll fix that for you just now." He pointed ahead to a glow, low down and faint through the intervening veil of mist, that had just come into view at the edge of a long blur which Joan knew to be a larch plantation, some three furlongs in front. "First to the fire," he said.

Unexpected as was the challenge, Joan's quicker nerves responded a fraction of a second more quickly to its stimulus than Marjory's. She smacked the brown's neck with her rein smartly, and the startled mare sprang out in front of Marjory's chestnut and, laying back her ears, shot away like a stone from a sling. Cecil's horse swerved away from Marjory's and never recovered his lost distance. The brown won comfortably by a couple of lengths and was with difficulty brought to a standstill a hundred yards or so beyond the little wooden tool-shack from whose open door that unexpected glow had issued. When Joan returned to it her two companions had already dismounted. Behind them, before a scarlet-glowing brazier, Purefoy was pouring out cups of coffee whose fragrance filled the little shanty appetisingly.

"Well, how do you like Nana?" asked Torrington, as he dismounted Joan and adjusted her stirrup-leather with his lean brown hands deftly.

"She's an absolute darling," said Joan rapturously. "But she has a will of her own."

"All absolute darlings have," said Cecil. "Now, where is that coffee, Purefoy?"

Never, it seemed to Joan, had there been such delicious coffee, never such crisp, tempting biscuits. She stood by Nana's aristocratic, inquisitive little head as she sipped and nibbled, and divided with her her supply of biscuits and sugar. When they had smoked a cigarette they remounted and fared slowly eastwards again until they reached the confines of the park, and passed out through an old postern-gate which Cecil unlocked from his saddle, into a narrow lane, then through a gate upwards along the margin of a newly-ploughed field. For some minutes as they climbed the chocolate-brown slope, the eastern horizon was hidden from them. When they reached the top of the little declivity the day had broken.

Above them myriad tiny wisps of fleecy cloud grew out of a heaven of palest, purest blue, the lower curves of each flushed with rosy amber. The belt of heavy purple-black that hung below this fair dappled expanse at the meeting of earth and sky opened suddenly to reveal a lining of smoky saffron. Due east Saturn and to its right Jupiter paled and were lost. For miles across the flat countryside which stretched away on all sides of the slight eminence on which they stood, the cocks challenged the dawn exultantly, passing on the signal until the mist-wreathed landscape vibrated with their clamour to infinite distances. An owl in the park, moved to emulation, hooted with prolonged and raucous defiance. A bat swooped like a shadow towards the shadows of the park.

"How heavenly," exclaimed Joan, uplifted. "It makes one feel as if the world were starting clean and fresh all over again, and as if we were the only people in it."

"Gracious, Miss Velvin," laughed Cecil, "it is worth while taking you out for a picnic!"

"I know what Joan means," said Marjory. "She is quite right. It does make one feel like that . . . unless one is a *blasé*, cynical boy of twenty-four."

"But even he can understand making a fresh start," said Joan gravely.

"One for you, you bad boy," laughed Marjory, at sight of Cecil's half-ruffled, half-amused frown.

But Joan had not meant it so. The wonder and the beauty of the transfiguration upon which her eyes were fixed dreamily had carried her thoughts back to her resolutions of the preceding night. Out of the mirk and the dark confusion soared that serene, triumphant light. So, it seemed to her, might great and noble peace come to even the most lowly and ignobly-troubled spirit. For some moments she sat with face uplifted to the sky; then, fearing lest she should seem to pose, she wheeled Nana so that she saw now only the long, wetly-gleaming slope of the field and the mist-enswathed Scotch firs at the edge of the park.

"I had not been thinking of Mr. Torrington," she said, gravely.

"I'm so glad," murmured that gentleman. "Frankly, a fresh start is for me unthinkable, at all events until I have shaved. Well . . . as the performance is now over . . . before Miss Velvin suffers from any further rash impulses . . . let us bethink us of breakfast."

As they slowed down their horses after a brisk gallop that carried them close to the little lake which was one of Joan's favourite haunts, she caught a glimpse of a dark and hastily moving figure which disappeared amongst the misty shrubs at the water's edge as they came in sight. She had seen it for an instant only, but for her it was unmistakable. The silly old man had actually risen before seven o'clock on a winter's morning to walk to the lake in the hope of . . . what? Meeting her? Talking to her about ghosts? What? Her smile curved contemptuously. Then, mindful of those good resolutions, she put it away magnanimously. Perhaps he

really meant to be just kind and friendly in an elderly, paternal, safe way.

"Who is that?" asked Marjory unexpectedly. "There . . . he has run into those bushes."

Cecil, who had failed to observe the retreating figure, checked his horse for an instant, then shook his rein again.

"Probably old Dunkley," he said. "He's mending the punt up, I think."

"Oh," said Marjory. "I thought it looked like your uncle, for a moment."

"I expect he's still having a little quiet music," said Cecil, and, to Joan's relief, interest in the mysterious figure amongst the shrubs died.

As they walked towards the house from the stables, Joan strove to compose a fitting little speech of gratitude. She achieved, however, only a shy "Thank you very much."

"Not at all," said Cecil coolly. "Very pleased you were able to come along with us. But never think of turning over a new leaf in the morning, Miss Velvin. The night is the time for virtuous resolves. The morning is the time for seeing their futility."

"Poor old Joan!" said Marjory, when she had disappeared up the staircase and left them standing before the great open fire-place of the hall. "I wonder what will become of her."

"Don't get your nose too near that fire, old girl," replied her fiancé, "or you will ruin it for the rest of the day. What time do you want to get back to Manton?"

§ iv

From an upper window Joan watched the car depart after breakfast with Marjory in the front seat beside the driver and Mrs. Torrington, whose chill had evaporated, sitting between Mr. Lomax and James Torrington. Cecil had rented the shoot at Stretton, as he had purposed, and the party, when they had disembarked Marjory at Manton, proposed to spend the day in pursuit of the partridges. When the car had dis-

appeared around the curve of the avenue Joan returned to her pupils and resumed with determined vigour their studies at the point at which the tidings of her father's illness had interrupted them. After an hour of French and German, Millicent was installed at the piano and Jimty sentenced to some severe problems in fractional multiplication and division. Joan seated herself between them, close at hand for assistance and supervision, heard Millicent perform three times leadenly the scale of C minor and modulate to that of E flat major, and fell sound asleep.

She awoke to find the children staring at her curiously.

"Have you done that first sum, Jimty?" she demanded, briskly. Jimty grinned.

"You needn't pretend, Velvets," he said bluffly. "You were asleep. I held a lighted match to your eyes and they never moved. I can't do these beastly sums. I don't see how you can have seven-thirteenths of a cow."

"No nonsense, now, Jimty," said the instructress sharply. "Get on with your work. You can do anything you really want to do. And you, Millicent, stop wriggling about on that seat and get your elbows in to your sides."

But despite all her efforts she succumbed a few minutes later a second time to an invincible drowsiness and was awakened by Jimty's pinching her so severely that, springing up, she chivied him around the room, caught him, and laying him across her lap, despite his manful struggles, spanked him, as had been foretold, wholeheartedly.

"Now," she said, as she released him, "run away and get on your things. We're going for a good long walk . . . right across the park towards Melksham. We will take lunch with us, and my spirit-lamp, and make tea. Hurry up."

"Hooroo!" crowed Jimty, and threw his strivings towards the discovery of seven-thirteenths of a cow into the air. "I'll bring my catapult."

Joan frowned.

"Catapult?" she repeated. But Jimty had vanished. Milli-

cent explained that the catapult had been acquired during Joan's absence from one of the stable-lads and that with its aid Jimty had already broken a window, seriously damaged a cat, and imperilled the eyes of various members of the household.

"He nearly hit a rabbit with it yesterday morning," added Millicent. "Only the rabbit sat still instead of running away. If we killed a rabbit to-day, Velvets, could we cook it for lunch on your spirit-lamp?"

To the company of this perilous implement upon their walk Joan demurred, yet yielded finally to Jimty's solemn promise that he would use it only when Millicent and she stood directly behind him. They set off in high spirits a little after eleven o'clock, their lunch equipment slung from their shoulders in carefully-proportioned bundles, and following the course of the morning's ride arrived at the postern-gate at twelve o'clock exactly. With Joan's aid Millicent scaled the wall successfully and was lowered safely into the grassy lane on the other side. Jimty, however, not content with so simple an escalade, climbed into the fork of a huge old beech that grew close to the wall and, climbing out along a branch, essayed to reach the coping with his feet. Failing in this, he released his hold and, dropping heavily into the lane, twisted an ankle badly. As a result of this mishap Joan abandoned her original intention of climbing to the summit of the ploughed slope from which she had watched the sunrise, and the picnic took place with great success under the lee of the park wall. For conscience's sake the conversation during lunch was conducted entirely in French, and with the aid of the cylinder of jam-roll with which the repast concluded Joan illustrated practically the verities of fractional division and multiplication. The claims of duty having been thus discharged and Jimty's ankle being now available again, he received permission to ascend the lane with Millicent in search of rabbits, with many solemn reminders of his promise. Joan lighted a cigarette and, pro-

ping herself against a pillow of tawny, fragrant bracken, fell presently to pleasurable reminiscence of the morning's excursion.

Pleasurable, yet in the main unflattering to herself. More and more clear did it become to her that she had hovered on the verge of a ridiculous and tremendous folly. She had gathered from the morning a totally new impression of the relation between Marjory and young Torrington, its quality and its grip. She saw now that between them was a placid, solid esteem and sympathy and understanding which romance and passion and all such vague, windy influences stirred not in the least, but which a thousand long-tried and tested interdependences knitted into a bond of steel. They had exchanged a very few words during the ride, and those of the most matter-of-fact description. Yet she had felt herself an intruder, an outsider. Cecil Torrington might like her well enough to flirt with her and make flattering little speeches to her . . . sometimes. But she felt very sure that he would never . . . could never . . . think of her as he thought of Marjory. She was not of his tribe. Nothing could ever blind him to that.

Besides, Marjory had looked quite pretty that morning. She had always looked her best on horseback, and if her hair was a little hard and meagre, it never became untidy. Joan recalled a somewhat limp wisp discovered when she had reached a mirror on her return.

She was conscious, too, that while her own thoughts had centred almost entirely on herself and her own performance and effect, Marjory's had visibly occupied themselves almost entirely with her, Joan's, pleasure in the adventure. No doubt this had been just as evident to Cecil Torrington as to her. No doubt by comparison with Marjory she had seemed childishly absorbed in her own enjoyment. His coolness had been the coolness of clear indifference, she felt, not that of a deliberate repression of interest. "Very pleased you were able to come along with us," he had said. "With us." The pro-

noun had excluded her, she felt now, with a quite unconscious brutality. . . . That was the way he thought of her. . . .

A new solution of his visit to Westbridge occurred to her. It had been simply that he had thought some misgivings or anxieties possible on Marjory's side, and had determined to allay them simply and effectively by getting rid of the disturbing cause, the pretty, forward governess at Shalcott. And . . . how stupidly . . . she had insisted upon returning to Shalcott. What a silly, vain little idiot he must think her. Her soul writhed and the palms of her hands clenched and grew hot as she recalled her demurely arch speech to him . . . so demurely arch at the moment of its making, so intolerably and absurdly inept now. "I will help you to control yours, Mr. Torrington." What vulgar cheek! What a callow, *gauche*, impetuous creature she was. How her vanity always led her to hasty, ridiculous conclusions. . . .

Well . . . it was still possible to withdraw with some dignity, to retire into the discreet, self-respecting obscurity becoming her position in the house. Nothing, at all events, was to be gained by regrets for the past. Such as it was, it had been at least interesting, moving, alive . . . that passage with him; preferable in its folly and unhappiness to a thousand tranquil, dead years of Overbarrow. For the future she would clothe herself with a reserve as aloof as his own. The thought of the faintest disloyalty to Marjory was now repellent.

Her memory flickered to that furtive figure that had disappeared with such ludicrous haste into the shrubbery at the lake-side. She saw again Cecil's keen brown profile, with its fine-nostrilled, aquiline nose and bold, jutting chin, and sharply cut eyelids, turned towards that ignominious hiding-place. She saw his lithe, long-limbed figure swaying easily to the movement of his horse as if he and it were one. She saw, breathed again, all his vigorous, courageous, defiant youth. Ah . . . what a splendid lover . . . if he loved.

. . . How he would have smiled if they had ridden across to the lake and come upon that prim, oily old uncle of his, creeping and dodging amongst the bushes. . . .

Of course . . . there were other views to be taken . . . if one blinked difficulties and considered the practical and the prudent only. One could glance at those other views without actually approving them. One ought to think all round a thing . . . the great thing . . . *the* thing. . . .

A girl was quite entitled to do the best she could for herself. That was a postulate of the losing game which every girl was born to play. If she could, a girl was perfectly entitled to turn defeat to victory. Youth faded and good-looks vanished, and perhaps, after all, even the most adoring of adorations grew cold. Money and position remained, though . . . sure, solid, lasting, commanding things. . . .

A man of sixty-seven might die . . . at any moment. One might be a widow in twelve months. It was horrible to think of such things, so. But still, facts were facts. The widow of James Torrington would be able to purchase most things that the world offered for sale. . . .

They were probably lunching now, somewhere on The Hangings, perhaps not a mile from Overbarrow, perhaps in sight of its beeches. She failed to conceive James Torrington in the character of a sportsman, although he had exhibited his spindle shanks in knickerbockers that morning and had concealed his musty grey hairs beneath the most sporting of tweed caps. Probably he did not shoot. Probably he stumbled along the steep slopes of The Hangings after the guns, thinking, perhaps, even at that moment, of her. . . .

How she always came back to herself. . . . How tiresome it was. . . .

The southerly sunlight, broken by the nearly bare branches of the overhanging trees, dappled the bronze bracken and the lane's russet carpet of fallen beech-leaves with dancing gold. Joan's eyes closed gradually as she watched the quivering play of the beams on frond and leaf. She settled herself more

comfortably in her nestling-place and for the third time that morning fell sound asleep.

Jimty's voice awakened her. She opened her eyes to see him standing, with Millicent at his elbow, at the other side of the lane, taking careful aim at the lower branches of the giant beech from which he had fallen. The pocket of the catapult was drawn back to one ferocious eye; the other eye was screwed up as ferociously. He fired, and as he fired an expression of startled dismay flitted across his face. From the wall behind Joan and above her came a scream of pain and anger.

"Lord!" exclaimed Jimty. And then a sinister silence fell, broken only by stifled gasps of suffering from behind the wall.

Wide awake now, Joan scrambled to her feet.

"Jimty!" she exclaimed, horror-stricken. "What have you done? You have hit some one."

"Uncle James," murmured the boy, in an awed whisper, approaching her. "I got him right in the face."

Stupefied, Joan turned and gazed at the wall. Millicent stifled a frightened giggle and separated herself morally from her brother's crime by attaching herself to the further side of Joan's skirt. A red, bony hand with huge white knuckles grasped the coping; another followed it. The head and shoulders of Mr. James Torrington rose awfully into view. Joan perceived to her horror at the corner of his left eye a large and angry-looking abrasion from which a little rivulet of blood trickled down his cheek.

The apparition smiled sourly. "Half an inch to the right and I should have lost my eye," it said grimly. In silence the party in the lane watched him hoist himself stiffly on to the coping and scramble cautiously to the grass beside them.

"Do let me bathe your cheek, Mr. Torrington," cried Joan, hastening to the little kettle which had boiled the water for their tea. Fortunately sufficient water remained to moisten the handkerchief which the victim produced. With delicate

carefulness Joan dabbed the wound to cleanliness and returned the handkerchief to its owner.

"I shall keep this," he said with a smile of congealing oiliness, ". . . as a souvenir of those deft little ministering hands."

"What on earth did you fire at, Jimty?" asked Joan, turning away hastily from this embarrassing gratitude.

"We saw something on the top of the wall and we waited until we saw it again. And then I fired. It was Uncle's hand. But how was I to know that?"

"How, indeed?" said his uncle, sarcastically. "But I don't think you ought to allow him to use that dangerous weapon so recklessly, Miss Velvin, if I may say so. As I say, I might easily have lost an eye."

"And then Jimty would have had to marry you," said Millicent glibly. "You always have to marry a person you put their eye out."

"Millicent!" exclaimed Joan. "Do speak English. 'Whose eye you have put out' you mean."

"I couldn't marry Uncle James, silly," said Jimty. "You could, if you were old enough. Or Velvets could." He surveyed his uncle, whose maxillaries were performing strange champings and grindings. "Is your jaw getting stiff, Uncle? Perhaps you'll get lock-jaw, like Velvets's father."

His victim glared at him with the eyes of a surly codfish.

"Your tongue and your catapult both require controlling, young man," he said with acrimony.

"We thought you had gone to shoot at Stretton with Cecil and Mother and Mr. Lomax," retorted the unabashed Jimty.

"*Tu parles trop, mon p'tit,*" intervened Joan. "We must be getting back now. Millicent, help Jimty to pack up. It is after half-past one."

The children obeyed. Their uncle followed their movements with moodily anxious eyes.

"You have had your picnic, then?" he enquired. He coughed. "That is rather a disappointment. I had looked

forward to a cup of tea. The butler told me that you had brought a tea-apparatus with you. I brought some biscuits. . . . Yes. This is a grievous disappointment. Quite a *bouleversement*, as our neighbours across the Channel say so expressively. . . .”

With difficulty Joan concealed her amusement. An overwhelming desire to laugh uproariously besieged her. The strange old creature's dejection was so manifest, so childishly abject. He had made enquiries, then, of the butler, as to where he would find her and the children. She guessed that those enquiries had already been pleasantly discussed in the servants' hall. . . .

And then, when he had tracked them down, what a reception. . . .

“You got back from Stretton much earlier than you had expected, then, Mr. Torrington? Did the car break down?”

“No, no. I . . . er . . . I found myself threatened with an attack of facial neuralgia . . . a complaint to which, I regret to say, I am somewhat prone. Though I haven't a bad tooth in my head. As sound as a bell, every one of them. Indeed, for a man of my age, I may say that physically and mentally I am thoroughly sound all over. . . . Thank God, yes. I have much to be thankful to Him for.”

“Indeed, yes. Health is everything, isn't it?” said Joan, safely.

Mr. Torrington paused for some moments to consider the effect of these satisfactory communications upon his audience. “So at Bradford I decided to return by train, as the wind up on those downs is so sharp at this time of the year. Then, as the neuralgia had gone off, and as it was too early to lunch at the house, I thought I should follow you young people and join you in your *al fresco* feast. I must confess that I am extremely hungry now. I suppose, however, I must content myself with my biscuits. Though I see some extremely tempting-looking sandwiches still remaining. May I sample one, since you have finished?”

The children suspended their packing up and aided Joan to arrange the ruins of the repast in reviewable order. Three chicken-and-ham sandwiches, two beef sandwiches, two tomatoes, two slices of bread-and-butter—one a little clayey—and a substantial disc of the jam-roll still remained.

"We have plenty of tea and milk and sugar," said Joan. "But I'm afraid I used the last of our water for your handkerchief."

"There is a farm up there, at the top of the lane," volunteered Jimty. "We could get Uncle James some water there."

"Would you like . . ." began Joan politely. The uninvited guest reflected gravely.

"I suppose the water would be quite sterilised if we boiled it," he said at length. "Very well, then; thank you. Since Jimty offers to fetch it, I think I shall permit him to make atonement for his unprovoked assault upon my person that way."

Jimty, from behind his Uncle James, grinned disrespectfully, but came forward and picked up the kettle.

"May I go, too?" asked Millicent.

"I think not," said Joan.

"Yes, yes. Let her run along," said Mr. Torrington. "Young people love little forays and excursions of that sort, you know."

"Very well," said Joan, compressing her lips at this obvious artifice. "But first, hand over that catapult, Jimty."

James Torrington seated himself in the bracken close to the napkin on which the solid portions of his lunch were arranged. To them he added a large packet of biscuits which he extracted from his pocket.

"I think I may risk the chicken," he said, rubbing his dewlap meditatively. "But the beef and that rich-looking jam-roll would be simply poison for me. I am compelled to avoid all farinaceous food. My stomach, curiously enough, though it digests certain foods perfectly, requires vigilant

control. Otherwise it plunges me into the abyss of dyspepsia. I don't suppose your delightful, fresh, virgin young body has any conception of the horrors of dyspepsia."

At the last adjective Joan's sensibilities pricked their ears. Her tone, as she informed him that her mother too suffered from dyspepsia, held a perceptible note of stiffness. She had seen again for an instant that glistening, avid look in Mr. James Torrington's eyes. She regretted that she had consented to allow Millicent to accompany Jimty. She felt that she disliked extremely being alone in that lonely lane with this oddly-suggestive old amorist. And at the same time something within her laughed and enjoyed the crudity of his methods and waited, curiously, to see to what they were to lead.

She was to discover without delay.

"Won't you sit down?" said Mr. Torrington. "This bracken is softer than the most luxurious arm-chair, isn't it?" He caressed his abrasion as he smiled at her invitingly, withdrew his hand from his cheek and examined it.

"Still bleeding. I fear that I must present a very repulsive appearance." He produced the moist handkerchief from the breast-pocket in which he had carefully put it away. "Would you mind very much ministering to my hurt once more?"

"Don't," urged in Joan's shell-like little ear the experience of a hundred thousand feminine ancestors. "Don't," commanded her own common-sense and all the precepts of St. Angela's system. "Do—to see," whispered Mother Eve.

"With pleasure," she smiled, and, taking the handkerchief, stooped to mop the injured spot. But the position was an awkward one; the injured spot too low to mop delicately. She tucked up her skirts and went down on her knees. "That's better," she said, after a hasty glance up the lane. "I'm afraid you will have a nasty scar for some little time. It was really too careless of Jimty."

"I forgive Jimty," said Mr. Torrington, gazing ardently

into the grey eyes that were now almost on a level with his own. "I hope the scar will remain there always . . . so that I may always remember . . . this."

"You exaggerate so, Mr. Torrington," said Joan calmly. "I am simply wiping your cheek with a wet handkerchief. But if you make speeches of that kind to me . . . I'm afraid I must stop doing it. As a matter of fact, I think I had much better leave your cheek alone now. Touching it only makes it bleed more."

She sat back on her heels as she spoke, preparatory to rising. With astounding rapidity her patient's gorilla-like arms shot out and wreathed themselves about her.

"No. Don't get up yet," he entreated. "Stay. Stay a little longer so."

"Mr. Torrington," said Joan magnificently, "you forget yourself. Allow me to get up, please."

She essayed to rise, but in that position a directly vertical rising proved impossible. Impeded by his hold and her skirts, she twisted sideways away from him and drew with her the upper embracing part of him, which she alone thus supported now, the remainder of his person dragging in the thick bracken.

"Oh, you lovely, soft, beautiful creature," he panted. "I will not let you go." He slavered a little. "I will not let you go. I am mad. You make me mad. The feel of you . . . to hold you . . . to have your body against mine. . . . You glorious, lovely young thing . . ."

He dug a square-toed boot into the sandwiches and the jamroll in the effort to take a new purchase, and tightened the grasp of his arms convulsively. Joan, frightened and furious, recalled another such ignoble scuffle and the manner of her escape from it. But this time her assailant's hands were out of reach of her teeth, clasped behind her back. In desperation she seized his short, square-edged beard with both hands and tugged at it mercilessly. But it was too short to afford a satisfactory grip. All other vulnerable points being

out of her reach, she delivered a very creditable imitation of a right hook into the centre of the enemy's mustard-coloured waistcoat. He made a curious gurgling noise in the place where her knuckles thudded, released her and, dropping his hands into the bracken, leaned on them with hanging head. "Ooph!" he said. Then he collapsed, face downwards, and groaned.

"Good heavens!" thought Joan, springing to her feet. "Perhaps I have killed him!"

But almost immediately Mr. Torrington recovered. He sat up, limply, with a greeny-white face and blowing lips.

"You should not strike any one with such violence there," he muttered. "Just beside the heart."

"Well," said Joan, now at several safe yards' distance from him, "you should not behave like that towards an unprotected girl. It was most cowardly and disgraceful of you. And I shall complain to Mrs. Torrington as soon as she comes home."

A long silence fell. An old grey horse in the field at the other side of the lane, attracted by the sound of voices, approached the intervening hedge slowly and through it gazed profoundly with its honest, friendly eyes. Joan took off her hat and tidied her rumped hair. The glint of it in the sunshine attracted Mr. Torrington's fishy orbs, and he stared at it moodily for a long time.

"This is the most unfortunate predicament in which I have ever found myself," he said. "I . . ." He stopped to consider his downfall. "I *am* mad," he explained morosely. "You have driven me mad."

He took off the sporting-cap and threw it recklessly from him.

"Do you know, I lay awake all last night thinking of you . . . thinking of your beauty, your white, white skin . . . your wonderful hair . . . your maddening eyes. Hour after hour I lay awake haunted. I could not get you out of my mind. I rose in the middle of the night and prayed to be

delivered from my passion. But you have got into my blood . . . into my brain . . . into every fibre of me. . . . All the morning I have been craving to see you . . . longing . . . hungering for a glimpse of you. My attack of neuralgia was a subterfuge. There . . . I confess my folly to you . . . I could not wait until the evening to see you. . . . Oh, dear Joan, have some pity on me. . . .”

“I have no pity for you, Mr. Torrington,” replied Joan through lips that held a little arsenal of hairpins. “I do not understand how a sensible man of your age can speak to a girl of my age in that wild, silly, far-fetched way. It isn’t right. And I should not have thought it possible that any one who called himself a gentleman could behave in the way in which you did just now. . . .”

The amorist eyed her sorrowfully.

“Ice. Ice,” he groaned. “Cold as ice.”

From behind Joan a whistle sounded up the lane. She glanced over her shoulder and, beholding Jimty and Millicent hastening towards her, plunged the last hairpin recklessly into her hair, jammed on her hat, stabbed it with two murderous hatpins, and, stooping, rearranged as well as she could the bruised and battered materials for Mr. Torrington’s lunch.

“You will not speak to my sister-in-law about this?” he begged hurriedly.

“I shall,” gritted Joan, mercilessly.

“I beg of you, dear Joan!” he entreated. “I beg of you. I know you will not. You will forgive me, because I love you.”

“I shall never forgive you,” she said, quickly. “You have insulted me beyond forgiveness. You do not know how a girl in my position feels such an insult.”

The water-bearers were now but a few yards distant.

“I was mad,” he murmured again. “Another time . . . you will let me talk with you another time . . . this evening. . . . Say nothing . . . do nothing until then.”

"We got the water all right," said Jimty, "but it's all full of little insects and little slugs."

Joan inspected the contents of the kettle and then passed it in silence to Mr. Torrington, who peered into it, and then shook his head.

"Thank you, Jimty," he said meekly. "But I don't think I shall trouble about tea."

He began to munch the solitary undamaged sandwich miserably. The children looked enquiringly towards Joan.

"Very well, then," she said. "Pack up. We must really get back now."

They left the philanderer scraping away gloomily the more besmirched portions of the disc of jam-roll. The trickle on his cheek had congealed darkly and the surrounding area presented a highly-inflamed appearance. The necessary re-crossing of the park wall took place some distance down the lane quite out of his sight.

§ v

It cannot be denied that in sum Joan's estimate of the episode, arrived at by the hour at which she closed her eyes finally that night, considered its humorous aspects far more than any other. At the time she had been more than rather scared, more than rather viciously angry. Then the return of the children had interposed an armistice between her wrath and the offender. A phase of indignant resentment had exhausted itself on the return walk to the house. By tea-time only the comedy of the affair interested her. She had completely abandoned almost at once her intention of complaining to Mrs. Torrington, foreseeing that the recoil of the complaint might very easily have unpleasant consequences for herself. James Torrington's sister-in-law might reproach him, even upbraid him for his senile naughtiness, but she would more than probably dismiss her too-provocative governess. The wretched old man had had a sharp lesson; it was very improbable that he would treat her in

the future with anything but the most cautious of respect. She avoided carefully all opportunities of encountering him during the remainder of his visit, and though she caught a glimpse of him as he set forth for church in his Sabbath silk-hat, eluded successfully his suspected efforts to waylay her in her corridor. He departed on Monday morning with his Exerciser and his bottles of Salvatoria Water. The butler, who in common with his subordinates viewed him with disfavour, on account of the meagreness of his tips, remarked to Jimty in Joan's hearing, with sardonic urbanity:

"No more big-game shooting in the park for a little while, Master James."

The accident to the departed guest's cheek had, of course, been promptly reported in detail to her mother by Millicent, and the catapult had been at once confiscated and destroyed.

"I am rather surprised that you should have allowed Jimty to have that dangerous thing, Miss Velvin," Mrs. Torrington had said rather sharply. "I must really feel sure that I can rely on you to keep Jimty at least out of serious mischief while he is under your charge. It would have been an extremely serious thing for him—and, indeed, for me—if his uncle had chosen to resent, as he might very well have done, being disfigured in that way. Fortunately, he has taken it with the most extraordinary good-nature. But . . . no more catapults for Jimty, please."

"I don't think how or why Mr. Torrington happened to be at the spot where you were lunching just at that unlucky moment," she went on, after a pause. "But, you see, the improbable does sometimes happen. And the results might have been, as I say, disastrous."

Her kittenish eyes fixed themselves on Joan's as she prattled forth her little lecture. No doubt that curious coincidence had attracted her attention. But Joan accepted her rebuke in meek and unenlightening silence, and she skipped kittenishly away from the matter to go a-golfing with her Mr. Lomax. Joan perceived, however, not for the first time,

that her employer's velvety pads concealed claws. She had seen them uncurl. She guessed that they had all but scratched.

On the morning of the Wednesday following James Torrington's departure Joan received from him by post a very handsome diamond pendant and the following letter:

DEAR MISS VELVIN,

I send you a little peace-offering. I cannot help believing that you deliberately avoided me on Saturday evening and on Sunday. But perhaps by this time you have forgiven me. I am the more inclined to hope this because I know that what happened on Saturday afternoon remains a confidence between us two. It is what I should have expected, if I did not deserve it, of you.

Messrs. Sleath & Clayton of Park Street, Bristol, will change the pendant, if you do not like it, for something which you'd like. But please let it be something which you will wear often.

I hope when you come to Eastleaze next month that you will have quite forgiven me, and am looking forward to discussing with you that report of the Pericho affair about which we had such a delightful talk the other evening.

Yours very sincerely,

JAMES TORRINGTON.

To this Joan wrote in reply:

DEAR MR. TORRINGTON,

It is very kind of you to have sent me the beautiful pendant; but I am sorry that I cannot possibly accept it and must return it to you with this letter. I have said nothing of what you refer to to any one, nor do I intend to do so. I shall like to read the account of that case very much.

Yours sincerely,

JOAN VELVIN.

On that same morning she wrote to Overbarrow a brief letter regretting that her mother had taken such a mistaken view of her quite natural and reasonable desire to return to Shalcott, explaining why that desire was quite natural and

reasonable, and pointing out the many advantages to be derived by her from continuing to remain with Mrs. Torrington as governess to her children. "I should die of dry-rot at Overbarrow, Mother," she wrote. "It chokes me now. It is so dark and lonely and dreary. Here, where I am, I have felt that I was alive, at any rate. It is very hard to explain, but do try to understand and put yourself in my place. . . ."

And at the close she repeated her advice that Mrs. Velvin should sell the farm and move to Bristol.

Of this letter her mother took no notice whatever, and, in fact, tore it into minute fragments in the presence of Amy Lidgett, and threw the pieces with cold carefulness into the heart of the kitchen-fire.

Joan resumed the interrupted routine of her days. Of Cecil Torrington she heard a good deal but saw practically nothing for nearly a fortnight after the romantic promenade in the park. At the end of three days of rain dawned greyly a day of sleety windiness. In the night, it was clear, Winter had come. To Mrs. Torrington's relief she received that morning a letter informing her that the house in Clifton would be ready for the furnishers and upholsterers at the end of the first week in November.

"Now, Miss Velvin," she said from her lacy pillow, as she sipped her morning tea prettily, "we are in for a devil of a time. If there is anything in this tiresome world that I loathe, detest, and abominate, it is packing." She smiled kittenishly. "And this time I shall have to pack twice, you see."

"I love packing," said Joan. "If you will give me just a general direction and the assistance of your maid, I don't think you need bother about it at all."

"Do you really think not?" said the lady in bed. "How perfectly ripping of you. You really are splendid, Miss Velvin. I don't know how I should get along now without you."

Joan's performance proved as good as her word. Mrs. Torrington's share in her own packing was the trying-on of

a portion of the contents of her jewel-case before she handed it to Joan for consignment to its special travelling-case. Though much fatigued by this exertion she roused herself sufficiently to reward Joan's services by the gift of a bejewelled fountain-pen for which she herself had never found any use.

On the afternoon of Guy Fawkes's Day all preparations for the move were completed and, the children having accompanied their mother most unwillingly upon a round of farewell visits in the neighbourhood, Joan set off towards three o'clock for a last, solitary walk to the lake. Darkness had fallen as she returned along the avenue and, hastening towards tea, she all but collided with a masculine figure walking rapidly in the opposite direction.

"Well, Joan of Overbarrow," said a chaffing voice, "where have you been roaming all alone in the gloaming?"

"Taking a last look at my beloved park," replied Joan over her shoulder, without slackening her pace. "At least, the last for some time only, I hope. Quite chilly this afternoon, isn't it?"

She continued to hurry on, still looking back over her shoulder. She was nearly thirty yards away from the motionless figure which was now all but invisible, when his reply came to her.

"Quite," he laughed amusedly, and went on his way towards the lodge-gates.

"How I always overdo it," Joan reflected as she tripped along the avenue. She discovered that her heart was beating like a miniature steam-hammer, and that her desire to reach tea quickly had deserted her. In the darkness she made a little grimace of vexation.

"You *are* an idiot, Joan!" she said aloud, with conviction. She stopped and turned a listening ear towards the lodge-gates. There was no sound save the horn of a motor on the Bradford road and that still quite distinct thump-thump of that fluttering heart of hers.

"Bah!" she said impatiently, and stamped her foot.

In the dark perspective into which she looked a twig cracked faintly somewhere at a little distance from her, and almost immediately the swish of footsteps in long grass became audible. Ah . . . The thump-thump became a thunderous clamour in her ears. He was following her—moving rapidly across the segment of the arc which the curving avenue described, that he might catch up with her.

She could easily avoid him by crossing the avenue, or perhaps even still by hurrying on directly towards the house. She wished to avoid him. She wished to avoid another encounter alone with him in the darkness. She felt already insurgent in her that odd, reckless, surrendering impulse which had twice already persuaded her to folly. She struggled feebly to keep her will in hand. . . .

The sound of his hurrying feet approached her rapidly, passed on her left hand outside the line of the avenue elms, not twenty yards from her. She stood stock-still, irresolute. And then, before she could reach a saving handkerchief, she sneezed violently.

"Where are you?" called out Cecil Torrington's voice.

"Tscha," said Joan again. And then a third time, desperately, "Tsch-aaa."

"I believe you were hiding from me," he said, beside her now.

"I wasn't," denied Joan. "I wondered who it was that was following me, that's all. Why should I hide from you?"

"Why, indeed . . . on your last afternoon at Shalcott?"

"And if I hid . . . why should you seek for me . . . on my last afternoon at Shalcott?"

The young man laughed.

"I really cannot tell you," he said. "I was on my way, really, to the village, to send off a quite important and urgent telegram. I continued going there after you had passed me . . . for quite some little time. And then it occurred

to me suddenly that it was your last afternoon here, and that I rather regretted it. Quite unnecessarily, I admit. But I have grown accustomed now to see you moving about the house and the grounds, and I shall miss seeing you. I thought I should like to tell you so. So I turned and came back after you. You are cold. You have sneezed three times, and I can hear you shivering. Let us walk towards the house."

"But I am taking you out of your way."

"No one has succeeded in doing that, Miss Velvin, so far."

"Let us get on to the drive," said Joan. "It is so pitchy-black in here under the trees. That is . . . if your way is to be my way. Though I think you had much better go and send off your important telegram."

Cecil stopped.

"You are quite right, Joan of Overbarrow," he said. "My way is not your way. But some of me will go with you."

Joan laughed uncertainly. "You twist your words so. Sometimes I wonder if it is I who am stupid . . . or whether you only try to seem clever."

The young man laughed again, unruffled.

"Oh, I'm a fearless ass, really," he said. "Where is your hand?"

"My hand?" repeated Joan.

"Yes. Give it to me."

Mutely Joan obeyed. He took off her glove very gently and deftly, placed her hand between both his and held it so, for a moment.

"Joan," he said, "you are a dash good sort, a dash good sport and a dash good little girl. I should like to kiss you, because you are going away. But I won't."

His strong clasp tightened on her little fingers fraternally, then released them.

"Bye-bye, then. Good luck. Don't let Edna bully you too much. And be kind to my poor dear Uncle James. But not too kind. It isn't good for old gentlemen."

He laughed again, and left her.

“Oh, you darling, you darling, you darling!” hammered Joan’s little heart as her little feet scurried along the avenue. Her eyes filled with burning tears for the sadness of it. But all the rest of her quivered with a joy unspeakable.

CHAPTER X

§ i

EASTLEAZE, James Torrington's house at Stoke Bishop, was one of those desirable residences that stand in the seclusion of spacious and meticulously-kept grounds at the northwest edge of the Downs. The windows of the bedroom which Joan found placed at her disposal upon her arrival there looked westwards down the steep-cliffed gorge of the river, and their view was, she learned afterwards, the finest and most cherished view which any windows of the house commanded. From the bedroom a door opened into a small sitting-room, very delightfully furnished and stocked with a little library of novels. Upon discovering that this little suite had been allocated to her governess, Mrs. Torrington permitted herself an eloquent little lift of her very well-trained eyebrows. Joan, perceiving this expressive comment, was for some short time somewhat perturbed by it. But Mrs. Torrington contented herself for the moment with that faint, supercilious protest.

For the moment, indeed, she had many much more important matters to concern herself with, including the purchase of a trousseau—a tremendous undertaking, involving the consumption of an immense amount of time and of phenacetin and aspirin tabloids. During the first days at Eastleaze she paid each morning a visit of inspection to Cliffside, her new house, whose gates stood a bare quarter of a mile away from those of her brother-in-law. Usually Joan and the children accompanied her upon these extremely exasperating occasions, and rendered moral support by their presence while Mrs. Torrington vented her wrath upon disap-

pointing and dilatory foremen and their subordinates. Feeling that feminine resources of reproach were inadequate to the urgency of her haste to occupy the house, she invoked the assistance of her brother-in-law. His cold stare and curt orders quickened the speed of the work-people noticeably. However foolish and inept in the pursuit of unwilling young women, he was undoubtedly, Joan discovered, an expert in the harassing of unwilling workmen. At his morning coming the shoutings and the whistlings died away abruptly and the din of hammers rose in a sudden, furious crescendo. He shambled in and stood in the midst of the hammerers and stared, and said three surly words to which the foreman in charge listened with eager humility, or pointed with a stubby forefinger, whose aim the foreman followed obsequiously with briskly intelligent side-steppings for the obtaining of perfectly accurate focussing. Then he turned on his heel and shambled out, his trousers flapping about his spindle shanks. The men smiled and winked at his back. But they carried out his orders to the letter. A new conception of James Torrington began to oust Joan's first impressions of him. She became aware of a strange, dogged, ruthless force that emanated from his puny ugliness. This was the kind of man that made Torrington's Ales—that had wrested a huge fortune from the world—that controlled now, single-handed, one of the biggest businesses in the West of England. Those brawny, big carpenters and furniture-warehousemen flinched, she saw, before something that looked out of his cold, fishy eyes.

And then, an instant later, he was again an oily, flattering, foolish tiresome old man, oozing some fatuous compliment or playfulness to her in an undertone as they walked to the next room unable to keep his itching hands from her arms or her muff. . . .

His lips—his underlip especially—pendulous and moist through the wiry bristles of his D-shaped beard, stirred in her a shocked repulsion that she could not control. Time after time she tore her eyes away from them. . . . Why was

his underlip always moist? Why did he let it hang that way, laxly and plobbily . . . ?

Mrs. Torrington, after some days, allowed herself to rely so implicitly upon this efficient and agreeably zealous ally that she contented herself thereafter with a hasty irruption once in three days, a tempestuous whisking through the house and a beaming departure with her ever more infatuated Mr. Lomax. Upon Joan devolved the regular morning inspection, upon which James Torrington accompanied her as regularly, frequently carrying her to Cliffside in the Daimler which bore him each day to the brewery. At this civility, too, Mrs. Torrington's pencilled eyebrows arched themselves expressively and Mr. Lomax's merry eyes twinkled like a heliograph.

"However . . . as James is *so* extraordinarily kind and is saving both of us such a lot of trouble . . . and as Miss Velvin is *such* a sensible girl . . . and as Millicent is *so* observant. . . ."

"I should consider Miss Velvin the pink of propriety," said Mr. Lomax.

"Perhaps you have found her so," said the lady with pretty jealousy. "You wicked, bad old scamp. I fear I shall have to decide to lose Miss Velvin, presently. . . . I shall have to get a nice, plain, dowdy little thing for Millicent with glasses and a two-dimension figure. . . ."

Mr. Lomax denied the soft impeachment with merry giddiness, though he might truthfully have done so with the most serious solemnity, Joan having very firmly kept him at a very long arm's length after her first meeting with him in the library at Shalcott. But she had seen him, believing himself unobserved, training his monocle on her sportively, and had been included, noticeably, in many of the bright glances accompanying the sprightlinesses with which he was accustomed to entertain his fiancée. He appeared to her perfectly harmless but inveterately flirtatious, with the haphaz-

ard assiduity of the bumble-bee amid the flowers. James Torrington, she discovered, disliked him coldly.

"A facetious coxcomb,"—so he described him to Joan one morning. "Superficially amusing, perhaps—though he has never amused *mæ*. But a tiresome nincompoop. Incapable of five minutes' serious conversation even about the one subject of which he knows anything."

"What is that?" asked Joan innocently.

"Woman," said Mr. Torrington succinctly.

"Oh!" said Joan.

"I have no doubt he has attempted to fascinate you with his charms," said the brewer jealously.

Joan laughed coolly.

"If he has, he has concealed his attempts with great success. . . . They have done nothing to that carpet, you see."

Her companion stared at the carpet, then beckoned the foreman to him with that imperious stubby forefinger. "You see that?" he said.

"Yes, sir. Wants just to be brought a little tighter to the end wall, sir."

"You saw that yesterday?"

"Yes, sir. You pointed it out yesterday, if I remember. There hasn't been time. . . ."

"Time?" repeated Mr. Torrington. "I'll tell you something about time, my man. If I can find time to give my orders to you twice, I can find time to go and tell your employer so. Understand me?"

"It shall be attended to at once," said the man, cowed by the grim smile that accompanied the quiet words.

"We were talking about Lomax," said the brewer, turning his back on him.

"Besides. . . ." said Joan, "I don't admire that type of man in the least. He is too pink and plump and particular about his clothes. It is rather impertinent of me to speak

about him that way, I suppose. Especially as I shall be his servant shortly."

"Don't say that," said Mr. Torrington, with oily sharpness. "I don't like to hear you say that."

"Well . . . but I am practically Mrs. Torrington's servant now, and I shall be his. . . ."

"Well . . . we shall see. We shall see. We shall see. I like to hear what you think about people. You speak so frankly and honestly about them. It is quite refreshing to hear you bringing out those definite, clear, young impressions of yours. Now, my nephew, Cecil . . . ? What do you think of him, eh? Come now. Frankly."

"Oh, he is quite different," said Joan quickly. "He is a splendid fellow, I think. Splendid every way. Marjory Holthurst is a lucky girl."

"You think so? You admire him?"

"Oh, yes."

"Very much?"

"Of course. I love manly men."

"You. . . . Has he flirted with you at Shalcott? Come. I'll be bound he has. Eh? Frankly, now. No false modesty. I'm his uncle, and I want to know."

Joan turned to him eyes of pained surprise.

"Flirt with *me*? Mr. Cecil? Of course not. I think he was barely conscious of the fact that I existed. He is not a bit like that. He is much too fond of Marjory to think of any one else."

"Um-um," chewed Mr. Torrington. And after profound reflection. "Um." He glanced slyly at Joan. "There was some attraction that used to take him up to London a good deal, wasn't there? And I don't think her name was Marjory."

"That is quite done with and finished," said Joan. "Marjory knew all about it. He never cared about that woman in London."

"Um," said Mr. Torrington. "Bad. Bad. Poking into

actresses' dressing-rooms—watching them undress—taking them out to supper. Bad. Bad. A terrible temptation for a young, hot-blooded man.”

“I don't think Mr. Cecil Torrington is a very hot-blooded young man,” said Joan demurely. “But if he was . . . he has begun to cool already.”

“Men never cool,” said Mr. Torrington. “However, they may struggle with their flesh and keep it under, the fire burns to the end.”

“Really?” said Joan, indifferently. “Let us go and see how Mrs. Torrington's dressing-room is getting on.”

“Yes,” repeated her companion. “That fire is never quenched.” He shambled after her, following the easy sway of her figure as she ascended the stairs at a pace that reduced him to ashy breathlessness in the effort to keep up with her.

“Young legs! Young legs!” he gasped at the top. “Ah . . . what would I give to be twenty years younger. . . .”

Many such edifying conversations occurred during their peregrinations about the house and through the grounds of Cliffside. The absorbed interest of at least one of the conversationalists attracted the attention of the work people.

“'Oo's *she*?” asked one, with jerked thumb, from the top of a ladder, of his mate at its foot, one morning as Joan passed through the room with the children, followed by the faithful Mr. Torrington.

“Dunno,” replied the other. “Bit of all right, though, what?”

“The ole bloke thinks so, don't 'e, seemin'ly? Not 'arf 'e doesn't paw 'er pointing out 'ow we're not gettin' on. 'E's gettin' on all right, any'ow.”

It was impossible for Joan's own shrewdly observing eyes to close themselves to the eagerness of her elderly admirer's attentiveness, or to believe that his morning visits to Cliffside were inspired by mere anxiety to expedite the setting of his sister-in-law's house in order. While she scarcely imagined, even in her most secret communings with her

self, the possibility of becoming his wife, she envisaged clearly enough, after a very short time, the probability of his asking her to do so. The discovery that he had selected one of the most charming bedrooms in his house for her use and the prompt and even anxious attention of his servants to her needs and comfort appeared to her to make almost official and public—rather embarrassingly so, indeed—the amorous insinuation of his private walkings and talkings with her. His respectfulness was now beyond all suspicion. He was perpetually at the most obvious pains to keep before her watchful vigilance the assurance that his intentions sprang, if not definitely from *the* good motive, at least from a quite respectable one. And she was aware, too, that his incessant curiosities as to her tastes and abilities and past experiences—matters upon which he cross-examined her with a wily persistency—were perpetually trying her and testing her and weighing her—valuing her against the sacrifice of his bachelordom, no doubt. Her mother-wit and her natural instinct towards bare candour restrained her from any attempt to impart misleading impressions. But she had no desire to minimise such actual accomplishments as she possessed, or to cheapen herself by unnecessary revelations—either for Mr. Torrington's benefit or for any one else's. He learned a great deal of her St. Angela's triumphs, something of her unhappiness at Overbarrow and her aspirations towards more spacious living, a good deal of Mr. Clements—"a very celebrated dramatist, but quite a simple, ordinary sort of man"—and nothing whatever of Caleb Purney. Her linguistic attainments afforded Mr. Torrington, plainly, much satisfaction. He lent her "Madame Bovary" and "Mdlle. de Maupin," as two masterpieces of style. He agreed with her criticism that one was unnecessarily coarse in places and the other not at all for the young person's reading. These defects were, he admitted, to be regretted; but the style . . . wonderful, wonderful. Nothing in our English literature even *approached it* . . .

There was no piano at Eastleaze. But, discovering that it was a great pity that Millicent's promising voice should retrograde for lack of practice, he installed in the sitting-room off Joan's bedroom a very beautifully-toned Schiedmayer. He spoke, too, to Joan of singing lessons—for herself. But these she declined, pleading insufficiency of leisure.

Then, though since the advent of his first motor-car he had kept no horses and had never himself ridden one, he insisted upon the advantage of regular equestrian exercise for young people, and hired, from the very same livery-stables which had horsed the young ladies of St. Angela's in Joan's days, ponies for the use of Millicent and her brother. Naturally, Miss Velvin being an experienced horsewoman—she had declared herself passionately fond of riding, to him—she accompanied the children in their morning careerings over the Downs, on a quite delightful chestnut mare which the liveryman consecrated temporarily to her especial use. Equally naturally Mr. Torrington, in the course of his morning constitutional, turned his steps in the direction which enabled him to follow the progress of his nephew and his niece in the witching of the world. Sometimes, in the fogginess of frosty mornings, he failed to find them at his first coming forth, and his frequent holding-up of milkmen and postmen and newspaper boys and such early folk, to ask them if they had seen anywhere a lady and two children on horseback, created a quite considerable interest in the movements of the cavalcade.

"Gen'l'man lookin' for you, miss," a blue-nosed van-man would call to her. "'Bout 'arf a mile back. Goin' the other way." Or, "Mr. Torrington 'untin' for you 'igh and low, miss," a postman would inform her. "I see 'im near the Shirehampton Road."

"Why does Uncle James follow us about?" Jimty complained resentfully. "It's no fun when we have to walk with him."

"He likes to talk to Velvets," said Millicent, placidly. "He's in love with Velvets, I think."

"You are a silly little girl," rebuked Joan. "You just heard your mother say that."

"No, she didn't say that," replied the silly little girl. "She only said he was trying to turn your head. What did she mean by that, Velvets?"

The quotation angered Joan intensely. But her common-sense persuaded her to profit by it rather than irritate herself further by futile resentment. She suggested to Mrs. Torrington at once that it was perhaps no longer necessary to go to Cliffside every day, selected the afternoon for her visits when she did go, and, on several mornings which happened to be particularly cold and damp, decided that the morning ride should be omitted. James Torrington, thus eluded, obtained for many days but the most fleeting and distant views of her, and, to Mrs. Torrington's annoyance, at once ceased to call at Cliffside on his way into Bristol. Again the preparation of the house slackened, and it became doubtful whether she could move into it before her wedding day.

"What does it matter?" she shrugged to the sympathetic Mr. Lomax. "If things go too far, I can send her away . . . when she is no longer useful to me." And she was at pains to inform her brother-in-law at the dinner-table that next morning, and each morning thereafter Miss Velvin would go to Cliffside as heretofore. The walkings and talkings on the staircases and in the passages and in the garden resumed, and, a spell of fine, cold weather setting in, the liveryman's steeds once more careered through the morning mists across the Downs. Mr. Torrington plied Joan with shrewd questionings as to that temporary eclipse, and succeeded in eliciting from her at length its explanation.

"If your head turns to look at me," he said with unctuous significance, "I believe I may find a way to interest my dear sister-in-law in her own affairs."

Joan read the manuscript report of "An Enquiry Into the

Disappearance and Supposed Death of Walter Churchill Pericho, Esq., of Eastleaze House, Glos.," and was shown the passage in which his murder was believed to have been done and in which Mr. Torrington had twice seen, according to his own account, either his ghost or that of his brother—it was not clear which, after all—in his long, flapping, grey cloak. There was nothing particularly impressive about the passage viewed in broad daylight, with its cheerful carpets and mats and its fresh paint. But Joan persuaded herself one afternoon to venture into it in the dim hour before the coming of tea, and obtained quite a different impression of it. The light of a pale wintry sunset filtered into it through a low, narrow window at one end and died amongst the shadows of the other. Joan passed along it slowly towards those shadows, stopped, and retreated to the electric lights of the staircase, with the same panicky precipitation with which, as a child, she had scrambled out from beneath the old barn at Overbarrow. Mr. Torrington's surmise that the body of the murdered man had been concealed somewhere in that passage, either beneath the flooring or behind the wainscoting, disturbed her gravely.

Marjory arrived one snowy afternoon with Cecil Torrington and her mother, and ascended to Joan's sanctum for a long, happy talk. If she had heard anything of her friend's favour with the master of the house, she made no reference to the fact, beyond an approving survey of Joan's quarters and a laconic "Snug little bunk you've got, Old Cockolorum."

Joan, in reminiscence of her Harrow period, was careful to speak of her "sitter" and to seat her visitor in a "frowst." Presently their talk turned to the local ghost, and Marjory was taken to its alleged haunt. By chance, as they turned into the famous passage, at the end remote from the window, one of the gardeners, who was also the official handy-man of the household and had been repairing a broken sash-line, was coming towards them in silhouette against the wan, narrow-paned rectangle of twilight behind him. Joan uttered a little

scared squeak and clutched Marjory's arm. There was a moment of uncertainty until the handy-man became obvious. Joan laughed foolishly, while her legs still trembled.

This incident, retailed by Marjory afterwards downstairs, created some amusement. James Torrington, however, deliciously, took the matter very seriously, and snubbed his nephew's chaffing scepticisms as to his own experiences surlily.

"Did your hair stand on end, Uncle James?" enquired Cecil, blandly impervious to the snubbing. "That is the great test, you know. A cleaving tongue, a cold sweat, and, above all, perpendicular hair are the essential symptoms of authentic spookseeing. If you didn't have them, it was the under-gardener in his apron, for a fiver. I think it's a very great shame on your part to frighten poor Miss Velvin with such gashly tales."

"I quite agree," said Mrs. Torrington, with intention. "I think it is a very great mistake to suggest silly ideas . . . of any sort . . . to her."

"That, my dear Edna," replied Mr. Torrington, with silky sullenness, "is precisely why I select so carefully the ideas which I think may find their way into Miss Velvin's head—and into the heads of other people. . . ."

"Yes. . . . But not all other people have your strength of mind, you know, James. Old wine in new bottles, you know . . . or is it the other way round? It doesn't matter. You know what I mean."

Her brother-in-law smiled at her grimly.

"Oh, yes," he said at length. "I know what you mean, Edna."

"Tell Miss Velvin from me, with my bes' respecks," said Cecil to his stepmother, as he released his brake, preparatory to departure, "that if she does meet Mr. Pericho ambling along that passage one night, one of her deadly, haughty glances will settle his hash for ever. So that she has no occasion to be in the least nervous about him."

Had he *screwed himself round* in his seat and raised his

eyes to a creeper-embowered window at the angle of the projecting wing of the house, he would have encountered one of Joan's glances at that very moment. This one, however, held no haughtiness, but only the swimming tenderness of a gently-despairing passion. She saw only his cap and the groomed nape of his brown neck and the collar of his driving-coat. But to these her eyes clung obstinately until the car carried them out of her sight. Then she cried a little.

§ ii

Returning one night towards ten o'clock from the posting of a letter for Mrs. Torrington in the pillar-box just outside the gates of Eastleaze, Joan happened to raise her eyes to the sky. It was a night of wonderful stars, a curtain of black velvet pricked with myriad shimmering diamonds. All the northern expanse of the heavens was visible to her from where she stood in the half-moon of the drive before the house. Above her directly hung the Great Bear, the one constellation whose name and design she knew with certainty. Her eyes strayed instinctively to the larger lights, to the Twins and Aldebaran and Betelgeux and Capella in the East and tremendous Vega in the West. She gazed, impressed, lost in vague emotion. Through the naked network of a tall chestnut she saw the cluster of the Pleiades resting on an ebony branch, and thought of silver fruit and a German fairytale. Recalling the fact that the moving into Cliffside was to take place next day, and that it was her duty to rise at six o'clock next morning, she lowered her eyes to earth and turned towards the hall-door. One side of it stood ajar, as she had left it. As she turned, she saw the inner doors open and James Torrington's figure pass through.

He came to the head of the steps, wrapping a muffler across the white expanse of his shirt-front. Joan ascended *the steps* quickly.

"Aren't the stars lovely to-night?" she said. "We shall

have a wet day for our moving in to-morrow, probably."

"I can't bear to look at the stars," said Mr. Torrington, gloomily. "They depress me beyond all expression. I never do look at them if I can help it."

"Why?" enquired Joan, surprised a little by the vehemence of this confidence.

"They always make me think outside this earth of ours," he said quickly, as one who explained sketchily and hurriedly to a person who would not understand the fullest exposition. He turned to her sharply. "Do you know anything about the stars?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Joan. "I have often wished to know about them."

"Leave them alone. Don't think about them, or know anything about them. They make the strongest head dizzy." He waved a resentfully hostile hand in the face of the heavens. "You can look at that and take it for granted, and never ask yourself whence it came and whither it is going. You know nothing about the blind reeling of it through bottomless space. Space. You haven't an idea of what Space is. . . ."

"I'm afraid not," said Joan humbly. "I'm very stupid about things of that sort."

"You think those stars are fixed up there," went on the lecturer, temporarily heedless of her. "Have you any idea of the speed at which they travel, those steady-looking, fixed little specks of light?"

"Not the least."

Mr. Torrington swung round to the West and pointed with a hand all but concealed beneath his erupted shirt-cuffs. "Over there," he said, angrily, "there is a star—you cannot see it now. It is below the horizon . . . but it is there . . . rushing towards us. It is a star called Arcturus. That star is travelling towards us—towards this house—towards you and me—at the velocity of fifty miles a second. . . ."

second. Think of it. You've seen the Penzance Express, perhaps?"

"Yes. Going through Westbridge."

"Well . . . say it travels fifty miles an hour. You know then what fifty miles an hour looks like. Can you imagine a train moving twice as fast as that? Can you imagine a train moving ten times as fast as that? Sixty times as fast . . . ? You can't. Yet Arcturus travels sixty times sixty times as fast as that train . . . and that train would not make a speck on Arcturus. Think of it. That star, since I came out here on these steps, has come twelve thousand miles nearer to us. Think of it . . . that gigantic thing charging at us madly at that speed out of Nothingness. . . . Can you think of it? You can't. I see you can't. Well . . . so much the better for you and your sleep, of nights."

He blew his nose and turned his back upon the offending firmament.

"I hate looking at them," he said. "I hate to feel that all our progress and achievement is hurtling blindly to an annihilating smash . . . to be scattered in dust into an infinite Nowhere. . . . Better not to look at them. Better not to think of them."

This was a new light upon the workings of that odd thing, Mr. Torrington's mind. It left Joan cold, however, as a harmless but unamusing kink in an ageing brain.

"Well . . . I think I should like to know their names . . . at any rate the names of some of them," she said placidly. "And I do hope they won't bring us rain for to-morrow."

Mr. Torrington edged a little closer to her, tightening his muffler with one long bony hand.

"You have been quite comfortable here?" he enquired.

"Most comfortable, thank you. Too comfortable."

"Psha! Quite happy?"

"Quite happy, yes."

His hand left the muffler and dropped to her wrist stealthily. "It has made me extraordinarily happy to know that you were here, in the same house. I have thought of it every night that you have been here, just before I went to sleep. You have no idea how happy the thought made me."

"A very small thing makes you happy, then, Mr. Torrington," she replied, a slight embarrassment tingeing her tone with pertness.

"Suppose I . . . Suppose I asked you to stay here, in this house, with me . . . for good and all . . . as its mistress? Do you think you could always be happy here?"

"I . . . Really, Mr. Torrington, I . . . What a strange question!"

"Oh, come. Why fence with me? Suppose I was your husband. . . . Suppose you were mistress of this house and of me and of everything that I have and could give you . . . and I can give you most things. . . . Would that content you? Would that make you happy? Would it? Would it?"

His hands tugged at hers eagerly as if to wrest her reply from them.

"I don't know," said Joan slowly, after a long silence. "I cannot tell you." Her eyes rose to the stars again. "I don't think so," she said finally, after consultation with them.

"Why not? Why shouldn't you be happy? What do you want that I cannot give you? Why shouldn't you be happy?"

"Because . . . well . . . well . . . I should not be a suitable wife for you, Mr. Torrington. I am too young . . . too inexperienced . . . I know none of your friends. . . ."

"I have no friends," said Mr. Torrington, curtly. "They need not trouble you. When you say you are too young, you mean that I am sixty-seven. Well . . . I have no argument to convince you that I am not too old a man, if you think me too old. *But do you? Do you? Do you in your heart and soul feel that if there was no other difficulty or reason*

... you could not overlook that one? Come ... be as brutal as you like. Hurt me. But tell me the truth. I am bare to you. Make yourself bare to me."

"I don't think I should make you happy," said Joan, uneasily. "I can't give you any special reasons, all at once ... but I feel that I am too young to make a suitable wife for you."

"You think I should want to shut you up like an ogre ... to keep you away from every one else ... from other men ... from dances and things like that? ..."

"No. I hadn't thought that. I hadn't thought of that at all. I have only said what I feel. ..."

"That is what you feel?"

"Yes. I think you would repent very quickly of having married me. I don't know in the least why you should want to marry me ... you, who might have married a girl with birth and position and everything. ..."

"Birth and position!" snapped the elderly wooer. "Pah! I know them. I know what women they breed. Bloodless, colourless, half-made, degenerate, poor creatures, without a brain, without courage, without a passion for good or evil. Dressmakers' layfigures. Anæmic mannequins. ... I know them. My mother was one of them. ... See what a body she gave to her son. Clifton's full of them. England's full of them. You couldn't make a healthy, full-blooded, natural woman out of a hundred of them. But you ... you are a woman ... a real woman ... with warm blood in her, and strength and health and vigour ... and passions, too, for all your coldness ... eh? You are not so cold as you seem, my little Joan; are you? Tell me. Whisper to me."

For the last time Joan consulted those twinkling, distant witnesses of her indecision, avoiding the big, intruding head that bent to hers eagerly.

"I know very little about myself, I think," she said slowly, turning towards the hall-door. "But I am quite sure, at any

rate, that I am not the sort of woman you ought to marry . . . now. Good-night, Mr. Torrington."

And with that she left him tugging peevishly at the fringe of his muffler, and got with all possible speed into her bed. There, careless alike of the career of Arcturus and of all the future beyond six o'clock next morning, she fell, after a very brief reflection upon the oddities of Mr. James Torrington, into the sound sleep becoming the owner of so blameless and self-sacrificing a conscience.

CHAPTER XI

§ i

THERE arrived at Cliffside, on the day following Mrs. Torrington's transference of herself to its turpentine-impregnated atmosphere, one of her maternal aunts, a widowed Mrs. Formaby, who was destined to deliver a decisive touch to the shaping of Joan's destinies.

A multitude of detailed domesticities still remained to be arranged, including the enlistment of a suitable staff of servants. For these activities, Mrs. Torrington had now no longer time, and the widowed aunt was, it appeared, to be entrusted with the getting of the Cliffside machinery into smooth running order against Mrs. Lomax's return from her honeymoon. And, as became evident to Joan very quickly, there were to be other claims upon Mrs. Formaby's vigilance.

She was a bleak-eyed, thin-lipped woman of about fifty, with the remains of handsomeness, an autocratic manner, and a quite remarkable talent for uncomfortable insinuation. Having married three daughters satisfactorily, she had settled down to spend her declining days upon a circular tour of mother-in-lawly visits, an occupation which afforded her ample scope for her principal talent, and had the additional advantage of reducing her personal expenditure considerably. Her invitation to Cliffside had appeared to offer a pleasant variety in a routine that was perhaps a little monotonous in the regularity of its triumphs, and she had accepted it with alacrity. Having received from her niece the charter of the vice-regal authority which she was to wield for the following four or five weeks, she proceeded to make a methodical and comprehensive survey of the terrain upon which it was to be exercised.

She entered the schoolroom, alone and unexplained, upon the morning after her arrival at Cliffside, and found Joan and the children absorbed in that most tragic narrative, "The Queen's Quair." Upon her coming, the three faces turned to her questioningly, and not until a moment of hesitation had elapsed did Joan make to rise. Mrs. Formaby checked the movement with an authoritative hand.

"Pray continue, Miss . . . Miss . . . ?"

"Velvin," said Joan, wondering who the commanding intruder might be.

"Pray continue, Miss Velvin."

Joan complied, and proceeded with the reading of that vivid chapter that tells how the Lords came to find the Italian and how the King held the Queen in his arms while her lover died. Strong meat for babes, perhaps. But the reading was designed to clothe the bare bones of the unhappy Queen of Scots with flesh and blood more convincing than the arid phrases of The History of England had power to resurrect. Mrs. Formaby, however, having listened for some time in enigmatic silence, again interrupted the story.

"Ah . . . what is that you are reading, Miss Velvin? A novel?" Joan explained. Mrs. Formaby took the book firmly from her hand, turned over its pages at arm's length, and by mischance lighted on a certain speech of that unpleasant Lady Reres, to whose bawdy talk Mary listened in the days of her expectation. She read to the end of the speech, turned back to its beginning, folded her lips and switched her cold eyes on to Joan's somewhat resentful face.

"You propose to read these young people this book in its entirety, Miss Velvin . . . or merely extracts?"

"I propose to read such parts of it as I consider suitable," replied Joan, staring.

"Then I should say that you have read them quite enough of it, now. I think you had better find something a little less . . . shall we say, advanced. If you don't mind, I *should like to take this to show to Mrs. Torrington.*"

"Of course," said Joan, raging interiorly, externally polished ice. "With the greatest pleasure."

"As I shall be responsible for the children's progress for some little time," continued Mrs. Formaby, "I think I shall ask you, during that time, to consult me beforehand before you set out upon such unconventional studies." Her smile came and went like a pale sun-gleam on a wintry landscape. "We shall regard that as understood, if you please."

"Very well," said Joan. "May I ask to whom I have the pleasure of speaking?"

Try as she did try, quite sincerely, she could not obliterate an undertone of impertinence from the question and the look with which she accompanied it. She was to pay dearly for that tone and look; but at the moment the thin warmth that crept into Mrs. Formaby's rather flaccid cheeks alone concerned her.

"I am Mrs. Formaby," said that lady vindictively. "Do you always allow Millicent to sit like that, with her spine doubled up?" She poked her grand-niece sharply between the shoulder-blades. "Sit up, child," she said. "Don't curl yourself up that way like an old beggar-woman. You must pay more attention to this, Miss Velvin. Department is a far more important thing than the reading of novels. Get another window open, will you? This room is positively stifling."

She departed with the "Queen's Quair" and an air of awakened suspicion. Joan, bristling and monosyllabic, declared the morning's lessons at an end, and after a brief interval of fretful consideration sought out Mrs. Torrington.

She delivered the little speech which she had rehearsed in her room with admirable self-restraint. It was her most anxious wish to keep the children interested in their studies, and this had been her constant aim. She hoped she had succeeded. She hoped that the children had made satisfactory progress under her, and that Mrs. Torrington approved both of her methods and her results. Her methods had been those

in which she herself had been educated at the best school in Clifton, and which, there at all events, had always produced good results. If, however, Mrs. Torrington was not satisfied with them, she hoped that Mrs. Torrington would let her know, and she would be delighted to make any change that Mrs. Torrington wished. But she could not undertake to satisfy friends or visitors of Mrs. Torrington's who happened to stray into the schoolroom at odd, unexpected moments. Nor did she think it desirable that she should try to do so, or to discuss the children's lessons with them. As long as she was in Mrs. Torrington's employment she would be very greatly obliged if any criticism or direction could come from Mrs. Torrington herself, and not from any one else.

If Mrs. Torrington, who, after Joan's opening words, had continued the mid-morning washing of her teeth, had obeyed her actual desire and impulse, she would have dismissed this intolerably independent young woman on the spot. In fact, indeed, she all but did so. But on second thoughts, she re-larded her toothbrush with her own specially compounded dentifrice and decided to postpone vengeance until a more convenient hour.

"My aunt is a little difficult to get on with at first," she explained with the slightest of impatience merely. "Mrs. Formaby is my aunt, by the way. She will look after things here for me while I am away. I have no doubt, when she has seen a little more of your methods, as you call them, she will be just as satisfied with them as I am. Meanwhile, don't make mountains out of molehills, Miss Velvin. I really have quite enough to think about at present, without your coming to me with long harangues all about nothing. . . ."

§ ii

Mrs. Torrington, having tasted on a previous occasion the joys and prides of a wedding that had made a sensational

splash, had decided upon the quietest and most private re-departure for Cythera compatible with decency. The quietness and privacy of her second nuptial performance created, indeed, no less a sensation than the clamorously ostentatious publicity of her first, and provided the tea-tables of Clifton with matter for maliciously sprightly discussion for a couple of weeks. The strangely-retiring couple disappeared, no one save a few initiated relatives knew whither; a very magnificent collection of wedding presents was safely stowed away; a number of temporarily-engaged servants were paid off; and an atmosphere of dignified peace replaced the hurry and bustle that had made the house a place of feverish unrest for a fortnight. Mrs. Formaby hastened to install a housekeeper—a dreadfully ladylike woman who had been for twelve years in the service of a Countess and who ignored Joan's existence with the most impeccable politeness. With this experienced aide-de-camp at her side the temporary mistress of the establishment proclaimed her vice-royalty by a complete rearrangement of the duties of every member of the household, and by dismissing in quick succession two page-boys and a between-maid. In twenty-four hours she established firmly a rule of iron. In a week the aristocratic housekeeper, having proved too experienced and too ladylike, was sent about her business, and went about it with perfectly-suggested gratitude. It was clear that Mrs. Formaby intended to brook no rival near her temporary throne. So great was her zeal that she rose at seven o'clock each morning and descended in a dressing-gown to satisfy herself that the maids were duly at work, returning then to her bed to complete with an easy mind her allotted eight hours of sleep. The servants hated her with a hate that expressed itself in the crudities of Old Market Street. But they obeyed her commands with a scared precipitation.

That she took a very special interest in Joan, of an *anything* but amicable hue, she was at no pains to conceal. At any hour of the day now Joan was liable to be summoned to

receive some new limiting instruction or to account—invariably unsatisfactorily—for having acted without one or in contravention of one. Mrs. Formaby made a very determined attempt to introduce into the governess's daily programme a considerable portion of the work properly appertaining to the post of housekeeper, now vacant. But this move Joan nipped in the bud by prompt and open rebellion.

"If you want a housekeeper, Mrs. Formaby," she said succinctly, "I have no very great objection to doing the work of a housekeeper until Mrs. Lomax returns . . . at the wage of a housekeeper. But in that case it will be necessary for you to engage a new governess for the children."

Mrs. Formaby considered this menacingly.

"That is to say . . . you will do just what you choose, and nothing more?"

"What I am employed to do, Mrs. Formaby, and nothing more . . . regularly . . . until Mrs. Lomax returns."

"In that case it probably *will* be necessary for Mrs. Lomax to engage a new governess upon her return."

"That will be for her to decide, won't it?" said Joan, smiling with poisoned sweetness. "Do you want me for anything else just now?"

Mrs. Formaby enveloped her in a glance that scorned the idea of finding her useful for any purpose at any time, and shook her head almost imperceptibly.

"Thank you," said Joan very distinctly, and marched out of the room.

And then, on the very afternoon following this upsetting morning, James Torrington elected to leave the brewery immediately after a lunch of charcoal biscuits and Salvatoria Water and drive in his big Daimler direct to Cliffside to ask at its richly painted hall-door, not for the acting mistress of the house, but for the mutinous and disgraced Miss Velvin.

Mrs. Formaby was at home, of course. She was always at home. She was concocting at the moment of Mr. Torrington's arrival an advertisement for a housekeeper and for a

between-maid to replace the banished holder of that indecise office, and the page-boy who admitted the visitor saw no good reason why she should be disturbed by his announcement. Mr. Torrington was shown into the largest sitting-room and stood in the middle of it solitarily, eyeing his reflection in a distant mirror, until Joan fluttered into the room. The page-boy—a staunch admirer of Joan's fairness and her courageous front to the common enemy—beamed a benediction as he closed the door behind her and returned to the lower regions to vaunt his own valour in leaving Mowzing Maggie—so, regrettably, he referred to Mrs. Formaby—in ignorance of the caller's coming.

"I'm for it," he said recklessly, "if she finds out. But I know she pinched me smokin' a fag in the silver pantry after lunch. She said nothin', but I see 'er sniffin' an' wagglin' 'er old beak about. So I'm for it in any case. Peepin' old pimp."

And the child's angelically innocent lips eructated obscene defiance as he returned to the exploits of "Deadwood Dick."

§ iii

"Well, now," said Mr. Torrington, as soon as the catch of the door had clicked, "let us decide this. You must decide it. You must decide it this afternoon . . . now. I've left my work at two o'clock in the day . . . a thing I haven't done, on a working day, half-a-dozen times in nearly fifty years. But I felt this afternoon that I couldn't wait any longer . . . not another hour . . . that I must settle the matter now . . . at once. I won't shake hands with you . . . I won't sit down . . . until I've heard you say that you'll marry me. Now . . . come . . . say it."

But Joan had considered the pros and cons of Mr. Torrington much too anxiously and too deliberately to be swept away by this impassioned prelude of his. It was a *sallow, dead afternoon*—one of those afternoons of early winter when *sky and earth are colourless, blowzy grey, and the brightest*

room is dull and dingy and comfortless, and its only hope the coming of the hour when its curtains may decently be drawn and its lamps lighted and the world shut out. An afternoon when dark skins grew suspicious and dark garments funereal. An afternoon when the ugliness of cod-like eyes and pendulous, moist underlips and large, raw, white-knuckled hands struck the peevish eye with the offence of a deliberate unseemliness. Her morning skirmish with Mrs. Formaby had certainly made Joan's eyes peevish. She had said to Mrs. Formaby either too much or too little—to the feminine mind a particularly exasperating kind of failure to recall. Also, as Mrs. Formaby had seriously curtailed her hours in the open air, she had had for forty-eight hours one of those slight, persistent headaches that irritate without suggesting a cause sufficiently grave to be worth getting rid of. So that she took Mr. Torrington's urgent outburst very coolly indeed.

"Oh, I'm afraid that I cannot say that, Mr. Torrington," was her reply to it. But the words suggested in the feeblest way the discouragement which the manner of their saying conveyed.

Indeed, quite apart from accidental climactic conditions and appearances, from her headache, and from the disturbance of the morning, she had all but decided that she could never and would never say that.

Her moods had varied; but on the whole Mr. Torrington and his offer had shown a fixed determination to slip away from the seriously-considerable into the regions of the preposterous. She could discover in herself no surface which would make a convincing join with any that he presented. Her imagination stretched to a marriage ceremony—particularly to the organ accompaniment to it—in which she and he should be the alleged protagonists—even to the embarrassments of a subsequent reception. But beyond that it refused altogether to be coaxed or driven. By no possible means had she been able to think of herself as the wife of this *unlovely, dragging-footed old man who was old enough to be*

her grandfather. Under no conceivable circumstances had she been able to conceive intimate and permanent association with him a human possibility. From the throwing of the slipper her fancy balked resolutely when she endeavoured to confront it with the sequel to the marriage-service.

The fact that Joan's eyes were prone to turn with calm prudence to the main chance has been assigned a prominence in this history of her that has done perhaps more justice to her shrewdness than to her capacities for disinterested emotion. That calm prudence was in her bone. It was her heritage from a long line of slow-thinking, slow-speaking, slow-doing Wiltshire yeomen and perhaps no more to be praised or blamed than the faint suspicion of a Z-sound that slowed most of her S's. But there was another Joan—a fleeting, shrinking, foolishly-romantic and unpractical creature—kin perhaps to a certain Phoebe Langley of unhappy memory—a shy-eyed, fluttering-hearted thing that had begun of late to flit at unexpected moments with reckless, unwise feet across the careful calculations of calm prudence and smudge them to base and bedraggled unmeaningness. Not that this foolish Joan ever paused to look downwards to the havoc of her feet. *Her eyes looked always, wistfully yet with a desperate faith, upwards.*

What she looked at, what she looked for, what she despaired of, what she believed in, perhaps neither Joan knew. But it was certainly not Mr. James Torrington. It may be surmised that at this particular period that uplifted gaze caught glimpses of the Land of Cockaigne. But if they descried any particular house of gingerbread, they certainly did not contemplate sharing it with him. Perhaps with a splendid, young, strong, handsome, brown, lean, devil-may-care god. . . . But surely there could be no house of charcoal biscuit in that Fair Far Country, no river of Salvatoria Water. . . .

And so this other Joan said, very gravely and a little apprehensively, as if she feared that wonderland might vanish forever while she looked to earth: "Oh, I'm afraid that I

cannot say that, Mr. Torrington." And, at that moment, she meant it. But Mr. Torrington did not, or would not, believe it. He had satisfied himself by those assiduous probings of his that no sentimental entanglement stood in his path. She had no loved lover—had apparently never had one. The only male in whom he had been able to discover the least interest on her part was his nephew Cecil. And that interest he had decided to be an entirely unemotional and impersonal one, compounded chiefly of her affection for the girl he was going to marry. That particular field being, then, quite clear, Mr. Torrington had concluded that this comparatively simple girl whom he desired so ardently was, through inexperience, merely unable to imagine for herself the advantages to be derived from marrying him. And so he set to work now to place those advantages before her in the clearest and most detailed and most business-like way, shambling backwards and forwards the length of the room while he did so, save when he paused to underline some item of his inventory with a playful forefinger or a patiently-seductive smile.

This movement of his erotic symphony lasted for a considerable time, for he omitted nothing of any importance. But Joan listened to it without any serious attempt at interruption. If she understood that its theme was the purchase of her soul and body, she betrayed none of that shocked indignation with which, theoretically, the modest and virtuous and delicate maid should greet such a proposition. On the contrary, she sat playing with the beads of her necklace and regarding the kingdoms of Mr. Torrington and the glory of them thus laid out before her with an intelligence of the utmost tranquillity. But when he stopped once more in his parade and said, "Well?" she replied simply:

"I suppose I am a little fool. I am sure you think me a little fool. But I know we should both be sorry . . . you for a bad bargain . . . I . . . well, I, I suppose, because I *should always feel that I was such a bad bargain. . .*"

"Nonsense," said Mr. Torrington. "Nonsense. Really, really, nonsense. That is fearful nonsense. You know it is. You give me yourself. I am more than content. I shall always be content . . . humbly grateful. Yes. That is how I feel. If you will say that you will marry me, I will go down on my knees and kiss your little feet."

He approached, prepared, it seemed, to carry this threat into immediate execution.

"Good heavens! No, Mr. Torrington," said Joan hastily. "No, no. Please don't worry me. It isn't fair. I have told you already what I feel about it, and I can feel nothing else about it. Even if you tempted me to change my mind for a moment, as any girl might easily be tempted by such an offer, I should be bitterly, bitterly sorry the moment after. I know I should.

"I don't want to marry yet . . . any one. I want to live for a little and be young. I don't want to be dignified and responsible and settled yet. Please don't worry me any more about it . . . will you?"

He came closer to her and looked at her in silence, and she had the feeling that those long gorilla-like arms were about to shoot out and imprison her treacherously. She stood now, however, so that a table, the chair from which she had just risen, and Mr. Torrington, confined her, and retreat, save by an undignified backward kicking of the chair, was for the moment impossible. Even while she was realising this predicament, her fears confirmed themselves. Her wooer grabbed her unceremoniously into his arms, imprisoning hers to her sides, and after an unscrupulous little struggle kissed part of her left ear and a considerable surface of comb and adjacent hair. Then, still holding her fast, he twisted himself down into the chair and strove to draw her on to his knee, and snapped the string of her necklace, the beads of which cascaded to the floor, where his large feet promptly ground several of them to powder.

"There!" cried the writhing Joan. "You've walked on them."

"Pah!" grunted Mr. Torrington. "You shall have a necklace for every day . . . pearls . . . diamonds . . . any cursed thing you want, if you'll . . . if you'll. . ."

And then this *Allegro con moto* ended with the opening of the door and the apparition of Mrs. Formaby, who had been for some ten minutes roaming the house in search of Miss Velvin.

Her bleak eyes took in the situation in one outraged glance. She had caught the sexagenarian David and his Bathsheba in the very act. She was shocked—genuinely shocked—shocked to suffocation. Something of the old man's predilection for Joan she had learned from Mrs. Torrington, and had undertaken to keep it under surveillance. The discovery of the pair in flagrant embrace, in the very heart of her stronghold, was too suddenly overwhelming. It paralysed her brain and her tongue.

From that paralysis, Mr. Torrington gave her no time to recover properly. He released Joan and trotted towards the inopportune intruder, with his long arms groping the air menacingly before him.

"Get away. Get away. What do you want? You're not wanted here, Margaret. Get away. Get off."

He caught her arm and pushed her towards the door.

"I shall do nothing of the sort," gasped Mrs. Formaby. "James Torrington . . . are you mad! What is the meaning of this? What are you doing here . . . with this girl . . . ?"

"Mind your own business," said Mr. Torrington, still pushing urgently. "I tell you you are not wanted here. Come back in ten minutes . . . a quarter of an hour . . . I will explain then. . . Go on. Don't argue now. Go away . . . it's all right."

"I consider that it is anything but all right," said Mrs. Formaby, escaping from him. "Pardon me, but I consider

it anything but all right. Miss Velvin . . . will you have the goodness to go at once to your room, and remain there until I send for you. . . .”

“She will do nothing of the kind,” blared Mr. Torrington. “Now, listen to me, Margaret Formaby. You know me. You know that I keep my promises. If you don’t get out of this room in three seconds, you will be sorry for it for the rest of your life . . . you and those three girls of yours. . . . You understand me?”

“You are mad, James. You are not yourself. You can’t be, to talk like this . . . to behave like this. Miss Velvin . . . leave the room. . . . At once. . . .”

Mr. Torrington glared at her furiously, snapped his fingers, thrust them into his pocket, and said, “Pah!” with exasperated contempt. “Don’t pay any attention to her,” he counselled Joan over his shoulder.

Poor Joan, confounded and humiliated, burst into tears at this point, and endeavoured to run past him to the door, her hands covering her face. But he grabbed her again as she passed him, and dragged down her hands from her eyes, not ungently despite his agitation, and turned on Mrs. Formaby with fury.

“Damn you!” he said with concentrated virulence. “You have made her cry. You will pay for this. You will pay for it. You want to know what I am doing with her, do you? Well, you shall hear. I have asked her to marry me . . . and she’s going to marry me.”

“No,” blubbered Joan, feebly.

“YES!” roared Mr. Torrington. “I say YES.” He turned once more to Mrs. Formaby. “Now you know, and I hope you’re satisfied. And I may tell you that when I leave here I shall drive straight down to Park Street, to my solicitors . . . and keep my promise to you. You were to have had six thousand . . . God knows why . . . but I meant you to have six thousand when I died. But not a

half-penny of it will you have . . . not a single half-penny. . . .”

It is only bare justice to Mrs. Formaby to say that at this serious threat—for her personal resources required careful husbandry—she did not yield her ground, but rather took a step more of it, towards Joan.

“Once more . . . go to your room . . . at once,” she commanded, with lashing insolence. “You shameless girl . . . obey me instantly.”

Joan’s soul hardened. The eyes that looked at Mrs. Formaby through their bedewed lashes were agate.

“Don’t be impertinent, please,” she said with equal insolence. “Mr. Torrington has told you that we wish to be alone. . . . If you will not leave us alone . . . we must only leave you here.”

“How dare you speak to me like that!” choked Mrs. Formaby. “You shall leave this house within the hour.”

“Let us get out of this,” said Mr. Torrington eagerly. “Come. We will go out on the Downs. Anywhere. The car is outside. . . . You don’t want a hat. Come.”

He drew Joan towards the door. She made no resistance. Mrs. Formaby watched them helplessly.

“For goodness’ sake, James Torrington,” she entreated, “think what you are doing . . . think of the servants . . . think of my position. . . . If I am to believe what you have just said. . . .”

“Who cares whether you believe it or not?” demanded Mr. Torrington. “Stop talking, and go away.”

“Oh, very well,” said Mrs. Formaby, shrugged her shoulders and washed her hands protestingly, and left the room.

Ten minutes passed, half an hour . . . an hour . . . an hour and a half. At five minutes past five Mr. Torrington went away, and Joan ascended to her bedroom and locked herself in. At the nearest telegraph office Mr. Torrington

despatched the following wire to Miss Holthurst, Manton, Bradford-on-Avon.

Can you have me Manton for few days. If possible wrnt see you to-night most urgent. Mr. Torrington's car going Manton now for you. JOAN.

To which Marjory replied:

Of course. Coming. Awaiting car. Hope not ill. MARJORY.

At the moment at which this message reached Joan her friend, seated in the back of Mr. Torrington's Daimler and speeding towards her at thirty miles an hour, was listening to his amazing tale with her characteristic frowning smile. When he had ended she said simply:

"Gawblimey. Some proposal. Poor Old Cockolorum!"

§ iv

Joan awoke next morning in that room which had formed definitely for her the image of the perfect bedroom, to find Marjory and Mrs. Holthurst smiling down at her.

"You look such a delicious baby when you are asleep, Joan," Mrs. Holthurst explained. "My husband and I are both so sorry that we got back too late last night to see you and hear your great news from your own self. But old Lady Millcott's dinners always do drag on interminably. We could not get away until half-past ten."

She seated herself on the bed while Marjory busied herself with the tea-tray which she had insisted on carrying in with her own hands.

"But . . . *what* news it is, my dear child," continued Mrs. Holthurst. "It is just like a tale of Hans Andersen. My husband has ordered me to tell you at once that in his opinion, with the exception of the girl who married him, you are the luckiest girl that ever lived."

Joan laughed gaily. So it seemed to her, too, suddenly,

in that gay, bright room, with those gay, bright faces smiling on her awakening.

"Much luckier than I deserve," she said, prettily, and sat up to receive her tea. "I suppose Marjory has told you all about it?"

"Well . . . I gave them an impressionistic version of it," said Marjory. "But they're simply aching to hear the full and true account. Personally, I think it beats 'The Private Secretary' and 'Charley's Aunt' and 'Hamlet' and the Old Testament, all rolled up into one scream, to a frazzle. Let's have the original record, Joan . . . right from the rim."

"No, no," said her mother. "There is plenty of time. I only just ran in to kiss you, my dear, and wish you every happiness and good fortune."

She stooped and touched Joan's cheek with motherly lips, and smiled again.

"But you will always be Joan of Overbarrow to us, my dear . . . even if you have half a dozen addresses and the most exclusive visiting list in the county."

"As for Harold and Victor," added Marjory, "I'm quite prepared to hear that they have committed suicide immediately after reading the letters which I sent off to them last night. Victor will probably do it twice. He was always rather unreasonable."

"Now, chatterbox," said Mrs. Holthurst, "run off to your bath, and let Joan have her tea in peace."

"I'm off," said Marjory. "But I want to make one thing quite clear—right now—from just before the beginning—and that is that I will *not* recognise Joan as an aunt."

They left the room, smiling back still at Joan's sleep-flushed face, to which her coquettish little boudoir cap lent a touch of childish naughtiness. Outside the door, however, as they separated, they exchanged a significant look. And Mrs. Holthurst's first remark to her husband—*discovered shaving with fearful adroitness with his left hand—induced*

him to pause in that operation and exchange with her a precisely similar look, and afterwards relather his chin quite unnecessarily.

"My dear boy," she said, "it is too horrible. If you saw her sleeping. . . . That awful old creature. . . . It's a sacrilege even to think of it. . . ."

§ v

'As she sipped her tea slowly, Joan's eyes travelled to the well-remembered little Sèvres clock on the table beside her bed. It was a quarter-past eight. Jimty and Millicent were at breakfast now—probably discussing her disappearance. They had been carefully secluded from contact with her by Mrs. Formaby, and she had not seen them before her departure from Cliffside. She regretted that she had not been able to say good-bye to Jimty, whose devoted attachment to her she had grown to return by an almost maternal affection. She felt sure that Jimty would miss her horribly and be sulky all day, and probably avenge himself by some demonstration which would get him into serious trouble with Mrs. Formaby.

She wondered if Mrs. Formaby had telegraphed the news to Mrs. Lomax. She wondered still more what Mrs. Lomax would say and do upon the receipt of the news. Whatever she might say . . . what could she do? Absolutely nothing. She might perhaps elect to make herself disagreeable in a cattish, furtive way. But her expectations from James Torrington played, Joan knew very well, much too important a part in her own prospects for the future and those of her children to render any overt malice on her part advisable or probable.

How would James Torrington's marriage to a wife . . . to her, Joan, who sat there in bed at a quarter-past eight in the morning, sipping her tea lazily . . . how would his marriage affect those expectations of Mrs. Lomax? From his own account the entire family had for the last six years or so

been awaiting his death with unconcealed impatience. His enormous fortune was to have been distributed amongst a horde of relatives . . . most of them female relatives . . . many whom, apparently, he never spoke to or even saw from year's end to year's end. His dead brother's wife and her children were, it had always been understood, to have been the heirs to the greater part of his money. But he had forgotten no one—not even Mrs. Formaby, barely a relative, always disliked—in a voluminous will executed six years previously, when an attack of nephritis had assumed so grave a complexion that the energetic sub-editor of Bristol's leading daily had actually set up his obituary notice in type. That will, he had told Joan, he had never since altered. But from the post-office from which he was to despatch the telegram to Marjory he was to have telephoned to his solicitor to attend at Eastleaze that night.

"You will find that I always keep my promises to the letter," he had said grimly, "so long as other people keep theirs. I shall make a new will to-night. It will be a very short one this time."

If he had kept that promise, what had been the result for Mrs. Lomax and Jimty and Millicent?

What would be the result . . . what *had* been the result—for her . . . Joan, who sat in bed at a quarter-past eight in the morning, sipping her tea lazily and rather wishing that Marjory had brought her four oatmeal biscuits instead of three? What would be the result for . . . her? She caressed her neck with a convincing touch, to assure herself of herself.

She had lain awake until nearly two o'clock in the morning, without forming anything but the most limited conception of that result. Her convictions of her own unsuitability for the perhaps magnificent position which James Torrington would expect his wife to occupy becomingly was profound. So profound that no clear view of that position had yet been able to emerge from it, no plan or hope been able to struggle to

the surface of her thoughts. She peered down into it still with rather stupefied eyes.

But down there in those troubled depths there stirred already the dogged, unconquerable courage of her breed—resolve that faced the impossible with the blank refusal of its impossibility—the stubborn, unyielding Saxon spirit, nowhere in England more deeply rooted than in the chalk of Wiltshire. What could be done she could do—*would* do, against any odds. All that greedy, waiting horde—every one of them now to hate her like poison, laugh at her, sneer at her, watch for her mistakes, triumph over her insufficiencies . . . she would show them. . . .

He was the head of the family, that old man who was to marry her, who was coming in an hour to remind her that he was to marry her. She would share the headship with him. Mrs. Lomax . . . what should she care about Mrs. Lomax, now? Mrs. Lomax, whose patronising rebukes she had had to listen to with meek humility . . . the lift of whose eyebrows had been like a lash across her soul . . . whom, in her heart of hearts, she knew, despite spasms of exaggerated praise and spasms of kittenish intimacy, always watchful, always waiting, always ready to pounce treacherously. . . .

Now . . . if she chose to be friendly, one would call her Edna, and be kind to her children in a handsome, godmotherly way. . . . Otherwise . . . well, otherwise, what *would* one care about her? There would be . . . always available, always at one's service . . . that magnificent motor-car with its chocolate-liveried chauffeur. . . .

One would wear beautiful furs when one drove in it. . . . One would go shopping in it, and the chocolate chauffeur would hasten to open its door and close it and take his orders and salute. People passing in Park Street would say, "Mrs. James Torrington."

And one would go to the theatre at night. . . . Visions of very beautiful gowns and wraps and flowers and, it is to

be feared, very conspicuously dazzling jewellery occupied Joan's speculations for a considerable time at this point. She had not been to a theatre since her last term at St. Angela's, but the impressions of that period had remained with her in all their first vividness. She saw herself settling herself in her seat splendidly; some distinguished-looking man in evening dress aided her to disembarass herself of her wrap; she saw the lights high up above the auditorium; heard the violins of the orchestra; breathed the indefinable, intoxicating smell of the theatre. And all about her well-bred people whispered in a well-bred way: "Mrs. James Torrington. . . ."

Perhaps it would be advisable to write to Mrs. Lomax and tell her, simply and quietly, of her engagement. . . . Nothing was to be gained by making an enemy of her, if it could be easily avoided. . . . She knew people . . . she might be extraordinarily useful. . . .

And she must write to her mother. It was impossible that she should return to Cliffside, she thought, before her marriage. Her visit to Manton could not decently and reasonably be extended beyond a couple of weeks at the outside. It would be absolutely necessary to return to Overbarrow to bridge the interval to her wedding day—an interval which it was her future husband's desire should be as short as possible. Still . . . it could not be shorter than a couple of months, she supposed, or at the least six weeks. Yes, she must go back to Overbarrow, and the letter informing her mother of her engagement must prepare her for the visit. . . .

How would her mother take it all? Probably with such joyful pride that their little squabble would be completely forgotten and forgiven. . . .

Poor old Mother. . . . It *was* jolly hard luck to be left all alone up there, to look after the farm. And, of course, to leave it would be, from one point of view, to tear up the roots of her life. Still . . . Mother was not really an old *woman*; not in the least too old to make a fresh start. She

must be persuaded into leaving the farm and going to live in Bristol. Joan promised herself to reward her mother's obedience to this persuasion with the most consoling and comforting generosity. Her mother should have a hired carriage to drive out in every day that it pleased her; and two really good maids and a cook. She would not probably care to drive in a motor-car. But perhaps she could be taken in it for nice quiet drives . . . out into the country. Not, probably, to Park Street or to the theatre of nights. That sort of thing would not suit her mother . . . or her mother suit it. . . .

One would have drawers and drawers full of lovely underclothes—delicious, lacy, filmy, frilly things. . . . And, always, silk stockings. And, always really good gloves and shoes and slippers. . . .

One would be expected to go on committees (what did committees do?) . . . and take one's part in other publicities of that sort. Rather terrifying at first. . . . But any one could use herself to anything with experience and practice. One would probably have to open bazaars and fêtes and things of that kind. Joan had once seen a fête at Stretton opened by Lady Pannett, and recalled her procedure accurately. She had arrived late, smiled for a brief space condescendingly, and gone home as quickly as possible. That was simple. . . .

Looking back at her, now, Joan saw that Lady Pannett was a very ordinary and unimportant person. Mr. Torrington . . . James . . . (he had stipulated formally that she should henceforth call him so) could probably buy the entire Pannett family and Stretton House, lock, stock, and barrel, a dozen times over. . . .

Her fancy jumped off at a tangent . . . Sir Douglas Pannett was a baronet. Now, baronetcies, Joan thought she had heard, sometime, somewhere, could be bought. She wondered if Mr. Tor . . . if James had ever thought of buying one . . . or would think of doing it now. In that case she would be Lady Torrington, wife of Sir James Torrington,

Bart. Torrington was just the sort of name that did justice to the suffix, "Bart." For her, her family history began with a baronet. How funny if she herself became the wife of one. . . .

Of course she *would* be Marjory's aunt. An absurd promotion; but there seemed to be no way out of it. She must be Cecil Torrington's aunt.

The thought was somehow more unpleasant than merely embarrassing. She strove to take a sensible view of this particular angle of the situation; but on the whole the attempt was a failure.

What would *he* say? He was in Ireland at the moment, buying a couple of new hunters, and was not expected to return for some days. But he would certainly return before she left Manton. They must meet. He would congratulate her . . . with that smile which she at once adored and feared more than anything else on earth.

She would see a great deal of him in the future . . . the whole long, wonderful future that lay ahead of her now. And she would be his aunt. She could not possibly treat him as a nephew. It was unthinkable. . . .

But from the very beginning she must make it clear to him that some measure of nepotic respect must be considered her right and due. "Joan" he might perhaps, and probably would, call her. But no more "Joan of Overbarrow" . . . save perhaps in respectful jest and in very privacy.

Mrs. Holthurst and Marjory would be an enormous help. . . . What dears. And how perfectly delighted they were at her good luck.

Her eyes fell again on the Sèvres clock. A quarter to nine. At half-past nine Mr.—James would arrive,—James, the giver of frocks and wraps and jewels and silk stockings . . . James the Aunt-maker . . . James the Miraculous . . . *her* James.

Fortunately he had not insisted upon being "Jim" or "Jimmy."

She sprang out of bed and ran to the nearest window. Outside was bright, crisp sunshine. She caught a glimpse of The Gunner romping with the dogs, and turned away to scramble into her dressing-gown.

She felt that her first action that morning should have been to go down on her knees and thank Heaven for her great good fortune. As it was so late, however, she decided in favour of the bath's claim to priority. Her gratitude could be included in the prayers that customarily terminated her morning dressing.

§ vi

Mr. Torrington arrived at Manton that morning, and on each subsequent morning of Joan's stay there, at half-past nine, and remained until half-past eleven, when he departed to his brewery. He made the frankest confession of his desire to spend those two morning hours alone with Joan, and the Holthursts in the most charmingly amused way gratified this simple desire by ignoring his presence for a hundred and fifteen of the hundred and twenty minutes of his visits. If the weather was fine, the engaged couple strayed where they listed. If it was not, they discoursed in the drawing-room without fear of interruption. Mr. Torrington's gratitude for this indulgence verged on the fulsome.

Curious discourse they held, those two,—for the most part of the most unromantically practical nature. Mr. Torrington brought to bear upon the business of getting married and being married all the shrewd acumen and foresight which had made his name one to conjure with in the commercial world of Bristol. He anticipated every difficulty, arranged for the smoothing out of the minutest wrinkle. Each morning he produced a special, little red-covered memorandum-book, the last-used page of which contained the suggestions that had occurred to him during the preceding twenty-four hours. Through these he went methodically with Joan, jet-

ting down opposite each item the decision jointly arrived at.

"Now . . . about those two small rooms at the end of the annexe. . . . Why shouldn't we turn them into two additional bathrooms? We shall have people staying with us constantly. . . . There are only two bathrooms at present. They're not much use for anything else. . . . What do you say, dearest?"

And Dearest would say, "I think that is a very good idea."

"You do? Very good." And the stubby fingers would scribble, "Bathrooms."

Or: "Now you must push on with that trousseau of yours at once, dearest. We have decided that you're to get it in Bristol. Well now, I'm going to ask Holthurst to let me stable the car here. The man can get rooms in the village. I shall not want it. You will be able to go into Bristol just whenever your dressmaker or your hatmaker or whatever it is is ready for you, and get back here without having to bother about trains. What do you think of that?"

"Oh, but you will want the car."

Mr. Torrington smiled at her, chidingly.

"It's your car now, remember . . . until I get you one of your own. I can do without it. That's settled, then. I'll see Holthurst about it this morning before I go. Marjory will like going into Bristol with you. Girls always like a shopping excursion."

And the stubby fingers scribbled, "Car Manton. See rooms Wallace village."

There were, of course, intervals of a less business-like nature. But on the whole the loving James was very patient. Only, when he kissed his Joan, he kissed her with a strange, slow, lingering gluttony . . . as if he were savouring her . . . as if he were turning a mouthful before he attacked his plate. . . . Other intimacies she refused point-blank. He developed one morning a desire to pinch her. And once, furtively, he succeeded in loosening her hair so that it fell *half-way down her back.*

"Some night," he said, when she rebuked him sharply, "I shall do what I like with it."

But on the whole he behaved with pleasing self-control.

His generosity was positively embarrassing. During his first morning visit to Manton he informed her that a sum of five thousand pounds stood then to her personal account at his own bank; that he had arranged with the bank's branches in Bath and in Bradford to cash her cheques; and handed her a bank-book and a cheque-book and five crisp, crackling Bank of England ten-pound notes.

Her engagement-ring cost three hundred pounds. He made a careful list of everything which she could possibly require for any use, and supplied each want with systematic magnificence. Twice he joined Joan and Marjory in Bristol, and accompanied them to assist in the selection of a grand piano, and to be photographed with Joan.

"Now, look here, Miss Velvin," said The Gunner, one morning that Joan found him contemplating the havoc wrought upon his drive on a wet preceding afternoon. "I calculate that the total damage done by your car, your postmen, your vans, drays, carts, waggons, lorries, wheelbarrows and other vehicles bringing goods and chattels up my drive to you, amount, to date, to six loads of gravel and the labour of two men and half a boy for nine and three-sevenths days. I should be glad to hear at your convenience what you propose to do about it. Also, I may say at once that traction-engines will not be permitted to pass the gates."

Against her fiancé's extravagant generosity Joan protested a little at first, rather helplessly. But with amazing rapidity she accustomed herself to a world that had become a treasure-cave where her wildest wish was gratified in the passage of a few hours. What was, was,—was always to have been. It was her fate—after all, not a hard one to bear with equanimity. Each day her tone with her tailors and her bootmakers and in that department of a well-known Bristol establishment to which the presiding young lady referred as "The Lingery,"

grew a shade more confident, a shade more exacting, a shade closer to the "Mrs. James Torrington" tint. Marjory's frowning smile surveyed this pleasant progress in self-complacency with frank amusement. But her interest in Joan's new possessions was no less frank and no less sincere than her admiration of the delicate beauty of which they were the enhancing frame. In a twenty-guinea evening frock of black and silver Joan was a thing at the first glimpse of which even the stolid, used school-friend caught her breath. In a hundred guinea sealskin coat she was superbly imperial. Her pronunciation of the material which composed it was all but "zealzkin." But somehow that slight drag of her "S's" became the garment wonderfully.

Mr. Torrington gave her also a dressing-case of morocco, with gold fittings. Secretly Joan desired one of tortoiseshell with gold fittings. But the aristocrat of chilling repose of manner who conducted the purchase conveyed, with pained boredom, that while silver fittings were charming and usual with tortoiseshell, gold fittings were . . . well . . . not quite. . . . Joan regretted afterwards that she had yielded to an intimidation which, upon reflection, she perceived to have been not at all sufficiently respectful.

In fine, Mr Torrington did his share of the thing very handsomely. The Gunner chaffed him a little, good-naturedly, at first, but, discovering that he disliked chaff, took him *au grand sérieux* thenceforth for the necessary daily five minutes. Mrs. Holthurst and Marjory avoided him discreetly on six mornings of the seven, but made up for it with sweet feminine wiliness on the seventh. Mr. Torrington tipped all the Manton servants with whom he came in contact generously, and in general bought and paid for on the nail everything that could smooth the course of true love. His own personal attire brightened many tones in gaiety and became indeed in places florid. At some of his waistcoats The Gunner stared thoughtfully. *The Gunner was a little sensitive about waistcoats.*

Victor wrote a very short note of congratulation, Harold a long one. Cecil Torrington sent a telegram. He had caught a bad cold from the damp sheets of a Dublin hotel, had developed a temperature, and been threatened with pneumonia. Marjory's interest in Joan's shopping declined—quite reasonably, Joan admitted. She spoke of taking her mother to Dublin unless the news improved greatly. It did improve, but Joan had by that time announced her departure for Overbarrow for the following day.

CHAPTER XII

§ i

THE return to Overbarrow was not the triumphal procession which Joan had vaguely hoped it might be. She went, by Trowbridge and Stretton, in her hundred-guinea seal-skin coat and the Daimler, with a new trunk and a new suitcase strapped to the roof and her new dressing-case reposing on the seat beside her. But the day was one of thick, drizzling rain and mist, and the big car splashed along the muddy, narrow roads, itself almost invisible, its occupant altogether so. Between Trowbridge and Stretton she decided to send a telegram to postpone an appointment with her tailor, and alighted at the little village post-office with a great display of black silk stocking. But Stretton's one straggling, sodden street was deserted save for two crows and a dog, and the official who received her message was a stranger. Joan swished out of the village in her splendour as she had swished into it, unseen by any one of her acquaintance. A vague resentment at being thus defrauded of her just celebrity clouded her face as the car shot up White Horse Hill—that steep, tedious ascent of her governess-cart days—without slackening its smooth, devouring gait.

Up there the mist-wreaths capped the hill-top and the grassy ramparts of the old Danish Camp disappeared ghostly a score of yards away on either hand as the car passed through the gap. Through the speaking-tube Joan guided the chauffeur across the flat, blind expanse of the Downs, to the shepherd's hut, round the plantation by the dew-pond, over the rise to the Lower Gate. Young Henery Meade was ploughing that long strip on the ridge from which he and her father *and Samuel Watts* had seen for the first time a motor-car come

to Overbarrow. He checked his team and came to stand at the edge of the ridge with hanging arms, as he had stood on that afternoon six months before. Behind him, invisible to Joan through her befogged window, Samuel Watts stumbled behind his team with his ulcerous leg. Long after the car had passed out of sight he limped across to join Young Henery.

"Come in 'er moty-car, be she?"

"Ah. His'n, be least."

"He be come with 'er, I'd dare say."

"Ah. Mebbe. Old feller 'e be, I 'ear . . . older nor you, Samuel."

"Her'll make'n young enough, Henery my lad. Her be young 'nuff to waarm 'is old bones. Hee-hee."

"Ah. Hee-hee. Rainin' main it be now, Samuel."

"Ah. That's right. Ah, a warm bedfeller her'll make for a man, if 'e wasn't quite a withered mummy."

"Ah. A wouldn't say a'd mind 'im bein' me, if zo it 'apened to I, Samuel."

They returned slowly to their respective ploughs, kicking as they went strenuously to lighten their feet of immense clods of leaden-weighted chalk which they left behind them, accurate moulds of their heavily-nailed boot-soles.

There was no sign of life about the house until Joan had pushed open the front door and entered the passage. A young, sleepy-looking girl appeared, then, hastily, rubbing her face with a corner of her apron.

"Good morning," said Joan graciously. "Is Mrs. Velvia at home?"

"Missus is gone into Westbridge with Mr. Purney, miss," replied the girl. "But her'll be back by dinner-time. Won't you come in, miss, please."

"Thank you. Where is Amy . . . Amy Lidgett?"

The girl stared at her blankly. "Amy who, miss, please?"

"Amy Lidgett."

"Oh . . . the old woman as was here before the girl as was here before me? Is it her you mean, miss, . . . with gingerish hair?"

"Yes. Has she left, then?"

"Oh, she's dead, miss. She died just a few weeks ago. She went into Stretton for Missus, and a weakness took her just outside The White Horse, miss, and they brought her in, and she died there, I've heard Missus say, while they were giving her brandy. She was a very old woman, I believe, miss. You were to come in, please; the Missus said to ask you. And will you have a cup of tea, now, or a cup of cocoa? Because there's both just ready."

Dejectedly Joan declined both. Her splendid luggage was brought in and carried with difficulty up the narrow stairs.

"I will let you know when you are to come for me, Wallace," she said, with the tone of preoccupied abstraction which she had adopted in the last few days from her recollections of Mrs. Lomax's manner with inferiors of superior rank. The man touched his hat respectfully and returned to the car. As it moved away, he surveyed the house with a broad grin.

"Come up in the world, *she* 'as, I don't think," he reflected, "Stop, Wallace. Go hon, Wallace. Come for me, Wallace. Carry my things upstairs to my bedroom, Wallace. . . . My eye . . . wot a bedroom! Crickey . . . it's a won'erful world."

Joan entered the drawing-room before she went upstairs to unpack. The first object which attracted her attention was a cabinet-sized photograph of the elder Purney, in a frame of red plush with gilt beading.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed disgustedly, and picking it up, put it away in that well-known receptacle of miscellaneous rubbish, the drawer of the music-stand.

§ ii

She had expected that her mother at their first meeting, having made a brief display of standing upon her dignity, would thereafter melt quickly to maternal affection and exultation. But Mrs. Velvin made no attempt to stand upon her dignity. Joan met her at the garden gate and aided her to descend from the governess-cart, and as soon as her feet touched the ground she opened her arms and clasped Joan to her expansive bosom in an almost passionate silence. Then, releasing her a little, she looked at her with a strange and unprecedented timidity.

"How lovely you look, my darling, darling child," she panted. "Your beautiful coat. . . ." (for this garment, with an eye to first impressions, Joan had decided not to put off until her mother's return). "You have grown. You look ever so much taller. Did Daisy get you a cup of tea?" She turned to the elder Purney, who stood now by the pony's head, eyeing Joan with his cunning, sneering smile.

"Shake hands with her, won't you, Samuel?"

"Surely," said the big farmer, extracting one hand from a pocket of his cords, ". . . if it's not too great an honour for me . . . now."

Joan extricated her little hand from his huge paw as quickly as she could, without speech. "Samuel." Her mother had called this detestable, sly old fox of a man "Samuel." She slipped her arm into Mrs. Velvin's and led her towards the house.

"You'll stay to dinner, Samuel?" asked her mother, dubiously.

"Ah. I doubt I should be welcome," replied Purney. "You two'll want to tell your secrets to one another."

His cunning smile covered them again lingeringly. It appeared to Joan to have a cunning of greater significance than his words alone implied.

"Well, come over to supper, then," urged Mrs. Velvin.

"Mebbe. If I feel inclined," said Purney. "Don't you wait for me, though. Like as not I'll come late for the ong-trees."

He led the pony away towards the yard, smiling at his witticism. Joan looked at her mother with wrinkled nostrils.

"Why ever did you ask him to supper, Mother? You know I want to have you all to myself while I am here."

Mrs. Velvin's eyes filled with that strange, unused timidity.

"I'll tell you about it, by-and-by," she said evasively. "I want to hear all about you first. And now, for goodness' sake, help me get these boots off. They're killing me. Now that poor Amy's gone from me, I have never any one to help me off with them. That girl Daisy's too pert. I don't like to let her help me."

But when, after dinner, Joan returned to Mr. Purney with a curiosity that was growing steadily uneasy, Mrs. Velvin said simply that he had been very kind and helpful to her and had, with his son, undertaken the supervision of the work of the farm, a thing which she admitted was a physical impossibility for her corpulence.

"He often takes his meals here," she explained. "Both he and Caleb."

"Well, I hope not while I'm here," said Joan. "I can't bear either of them."

"You don't know them, you see, Joan dear," deprecated her mother with visible embarrassment.

"I don't know them, and I don't want to know them, and I never will know them," declared Joan flatly. "Besides, now . . . you needn't want their help any longer. You'll sell the farm, won't you? I want you to sell it, Mother dear, and come and live comfortably and in a civilised way in Bristol."

Mrs. Velvin sat back in her chair, the corners of her mouth tightening ominously.

"*Oh, no, Joan,*" she gasped, with all her old stubborn

authority, "I shall never sell the farm. You must never mention that to me again."

"Why not?" demanded Joan.

"Because if you do we shall quarrel. We quarrelled once about it, and you walked out of the house and left me, without a word."

"That was your own wish, Mother."

"Well, there is no use in going back on it. But I want you never to mention that subject to me again. Never, so long as I live, will I sell this farm that your father gave his life to. . . . Never. Never."

She wept a little. Joan watched her in silence, resolved upon mildness with this stupid, obstinate woman who was wonderfully—incredibly—her mother; with whom, still more incredibly, she felt an extraordinary sympathy, a sympathy of simple feeling rather than of intellect, it was true, but a sympathy that covered large common areas of their two characters and produced in her at moments a curious sensation of their identity. There were certainly astonishing likenesses, even physical. Joan found herself suddenly wondering if eventually she would become stout and unwieldy and puffy. Involuntarily her fingers hovered up to caress the reassuring firmness of her cheeks and the clean bold sweep of her jaw and chin.

"Don't cry, Mother," she said gently, after some moments. "You know I don't want to ask you to do anything that would really make you unhappy. It's so lonely and miserable for you here. And now you haven't even poor old Amy. Only that little girl. . . ."

"You left me," sobbed Mrs. Velvin accusingly. "You went off and left me without a word. . . ."

The discussion threatened to be tiresome, too tiresome to make mildness easy. Joan ended it for that time by leading Mrs. Velvin off to inspect the contents of her trunks. In addition to the gold-fitted dressing-case she had brought with her the bulk of Mr. Torrington's other and more portable

gifts, and in admiration her mother forgot her displeasure. The dressing-case and the engagement-ring won her especial encomiums. But she returned time after time to the seal-skin coat, stroking it and weighing it and catching up an end to watch the sheen of the light upon its surface.

"He must be a noble-minded man," she declared, with solemn conviction. "Have you brought a photograph of him?"

Joan produced a proof representing herself sitting very gracefully, looking at the camera with a somewhat artificial smile and Mr. Torrington standing beside her, looking down at her with the eyes of a paternal codfish. At sight of this Mrs. Velvin started perceptibly.

"What!" she exclaimed. "Is that . . . *that's* not him!"

"Yes," said Joan very distinctly. "That is he."

"But . . . I . . . I thought . . . I was sure it was the young Mr. Torrington who came here one day with Miss Holthurst and her mother. . . ."

"I don't know why you thought that, I'm sure, Mother," replied Joan dryly. "At any rate, this is *my* Mr. Torrington."

"Oh!" gasped Mrs. Velvin. "Well . . . he's no beauty, I must say. Why, he's an old man. . . ."

"A little over sixty," said Joan.

Mrs. Velvin meditated the photograph lengthily.

"But he *must* be a noble-minded man; all the same," she said, as one determined to doubt the evidence of her senses.

Towards nightfall a torrential rain set in, and Samuel Purney did not arrive for supper, nor was any further mention made of him that day. But in the course of the afternoon Joan found his plush-framed photograph replaced in the prominence from which she had banished it. She fell asleep wondering why, listening to the old familiar moan of the south-west wind in the beeches and the steady gurgle of the gutter-pipe of the rain-water barrel.

§ iii

But next morning dawned blue-skied and mildly breezy, and at seven o'clock, fortified by a cup of tea, Joan walked across to The White Horse, to stand with flapping skirts and wind-tossed hair, looking out for a space across the country towards Bristol thirty-five miles away. At the verge of the misty greyness that still lingered to the north-west Dundry was visible palely. A train passed Londonwards beneath her, its thick smoke hanging above the line long after its rumble had died away beyond Edenham. Joan's heart leaped at the sudden thought of the journeys to London that would now be hers. . . . Perhaps she would travel by that early morning train in whose windows the faces had been clearly visible from where she stood. She promised herself, when first she travelled that way, to remember to look up from her window at that very spot.

On her homeward way she encountered William Gates with his flock, unchanged, with his long blue cloak, his slow smile, and his far-away eyes. She stopped to talk with him, contentedly, for a moment.

"A 'ear as 'ow you be to be married, then, miss. Well . . . a never was married an' never will be now, zeemin'ly. But it's not zo bad as zome zay, I've zeen that. Still . . . it's a touch-and-go matter for two parties, for all that. My old dad used to zay to I when a waz a young 'un growin' up, 'Willyum,' 'e zays to I offen, 'a good female's a won'erful thing; but a bad'n, Willyum, be worse nor a louzy shirt.' But you be a fine, well-natured girl, like your mother, an' a zays it az knowz you from zo 'igh. 'E's a business gen'l'-man down to Briztol, eh?"

"Yes, William. Mr. Torrington. He is the senior partner of Torringtons' Brewery. . . ."

"Ah. A've drunk me skinful of 'iz ales in me time, a'll now to it. A knowz nothin' about sheep, then?"

Joan left him, leaning on his staff, his great blue dog by

his heels, staring away to the horizon with his far-away eyes—the symbolical figure of the Great Plain, ageless and, in his passing, eternal.

§ iv

At seven minutes past eleven that morning Mr. Clements stood at the counter of the Westbridge branch of the South-Western Counties Bank, counting carefully the silver which Mr. Popplewhite had just handed to him in return for his cheque for three pounds. He performed his counting clumsily, and the expert Mr. Popplewhite, who could count silver with the rapidity of lightning and the accuracy of a cash register, watched his clumsiness with polite pity through his scintillating glasses. As he was recounting the last twenty shillings a second time the swinging doors opened to admit a magnificent apparition in a sealskin coat which, even to Mr. Clements's inexpert eyes, was one of splendid expensive-ness. He uttered an inarticulate exclamation, abandoned his silver in a jumbled heap, removed his hat hastily, and went forward with a shy, confused smile.

"How do you do, Mr. Clements?" said Joan with airy gaiety. "Quite fit now, I hope?"

"Quite, quite, thank you. I need not ask you. . . . I must offer you my congratulations . . . my very heartiest congratulations. I had not hoped for an opportunity of offering them personally."

"Thank you very much," said Joan, with a brilliant smile. "Bad news travels fast, then."

"Well . . . er . . . the fact is . . . one of my maids is the . . . er . . . sister of a young woman who, I understand, is in Mrs. Velvin's employment . . . er . . . and so . . ."

"I see. How do you do, Mr. Popplewhite? Quite well also, I hope? How is your mother?"

"Well, indeed, she has been rather poorly lately . . . *this wet, cold weather . . . I . . . I . . . excuse me, but*

I could not help overhearing what Mr. Clements said just now Did I . . . am I to understand that I may congratulate you upon a most interesting event?"

"If you wish to, very much," smiled Joan upon him like a dancing sunbeam upon the page of one of his ledgers.

"I am delighted to hear it. . . . I am most delighted to hear it. May I ask . . . who the happy man is?"

"Mr. Torrington . . . Mr. James Torrington, the senior partner of Torrington's Brewery," Joan replied explicitly, determined to avoid further misunderstandings upon the subject.

"Mr. Torr . . ." began Mr. Popplewhite, awestruck. He took off his glasses and put them on again. "My dear Miss Velvin, I do indeed congratulate you. . . . One of the merchant princes of Bristol . . . if not their leader. . . ."

"I am in a great hurry," said Joan. "He is waiting for me at the post-office, in his car. . . . Most impatiently, I hope."

Both men smiled their conviction of the hope.

"No doubt, no doubt," said Mr. Popplewhite.

"I am in a great hurry, really," said Joan. "I just ran in to change a ten-pound note. . . . Will you please give me a pound in silver and the rest in gold . . . sovereigns."

"Certainly, certainly."

The fingers of Mr. Popplewhite's right hand darted to a little pile of gold, and performed an almost invisible manipulation. The fingers of his left hand at the same time darted to a little bag of silver and did the same thing with it. And then both hands deposited simultaneously the product of their legerdemain, in two perfectly vertical and symmetrical columns, at Joan's edge of the counter.

"Thank you very much," she said, gathering up the coins and sweeping them into her bag. "I am in an awful hurry. Good-bye. Good-bye, Mr. Clements. How is that sister of yours? Still looking after you properly, I hope."

Mr. Clements thought of hastening to open the door in

her. But while he thought, she was gone. The branch office of the South-Western Counties Bank became a dark, dull, dingy, dismal tomb. Though, in fact, as branch bank offices go, it was a cheery little place.

Now, the net result of this incident for Mr. Popplewhite was that upon checking his cash that afternoon he found himself one sovereign short, a calamity that had never before befallen him in his career as a cashier. For several days he debated the composition of a polite little letter to Miss Velvin, to whom most certainly he had paid out that surplus sovereign. But for once his commonsense failed him. He could not persuade himself to write and ask that overpoweringly beautiful apparition to refund a sovereign which his own carelessness had presented to her. Sorrowfully he replaced it out of his own pocket, and decided to deny himself a new pair of boots which he had been on the point of purchasing.

For Mr. Clements that meeting had no less disturbing consequences, as Joan had hoped it might have. For as the Daimler had drawn up outside the post-office, a few doors down the street, where Mr. Torrington desired to send a telegram—of which more presently,—she had seen Mr. Clements enter the Bank, and had promptly decided to obtain from Mr. Popplewhite quite unnecessarily, change for one of her ten-pound notes while her fiancé was busied in the post-office. She had meant to dazzle Mr. Clements (and incidentally Mr. Popplewhite) with her James and her seal-skin coat, and sear his heart with her airy, happy indifference. She did not pause to think why, exactly, she wanted to do that; but she did want to do it. And to a quite satisfying degree she succeeded in doing it.

For Mr. Clements, having grabbed up his silver and transferred it in hurried fistfuls to his trousers-pocket and bade Mr. Popplewhite the most abstracted of good-mornings, hastened out of the bank in time to see the tails of Joan's sealskin coat and one slim black silk stocking and a very smart and *fashionable shoe* disappearing into a large and luxurious-

looking motor-car gaily, and felt at the sight a sudden sickening pang of loss. So little doubt was there for him at that moment that he had loved her that he felt that he loved her still with an adoration ten times more passionate than that of which he had believed himself for ever cured. He drove home moodily, mostly on the wrong side of the road, and narrowly escaped a couple of indignant motor-cars.

"Cursed things," said Mr. Clements. "Oughtn't to be allowed in the country. Ostentatious, stinking, dust-raising, blood-thirsty things! Full of bloated commercial vulgarians and their over-dressed females. Ought to keep where they belong. Offence to God and Man and decent Beast."

And for several days thereafter—despite the favourable promise of the rehearsals of his newest play, "Tubbarub," of which he continued to learn by post, telegram and telephone—for he never attended rehearsals in person—his temper was so trying that Rosie, the sister of Overbarrow's Daisy, lost her complexion and several pounds of Wiltshire buxomness in excessive tears.

§ v

The telegram which Mr. Torrington had despatched while Joan was thus disturbing the peace of mind of Mr. Clements and Mr. Popplewhite was addressed to "Lomax, Hôtel Meurice, Paris," and said: "Joan accepts with pleasure. Returning Manton few days. Could go Cliffside seventh or eighth. Writing."

For Mrs. Lomax had written in the most delighted and eagerly friendly way and had enclosed for Joan a gracefully-worded invitation to be her guest at Cliffside for any such period as she might desire. Her own return to Clifton was fixed for the sixth of December—hastened, her letter had implied, by anxiety to atone for the untoward circumstances of Joan's departure from her house.

With those glad tidings, Mr. Torrington had hastened up to Overbarrow, having summoned the Daimler to his aid by

telephone, and without hesitation Joan had consented to accept the proffered olive-branch. Mrs. Lomax's invitation, it was true, did contain certain possible difficulties; but it bridged the serious one of that awkward interval to her wedding. Mr. Torrington spoke now of an interval of four weeks as a maximum. There was no reason, he urged, why in four weeks she should not be able to buy sufficient clothes to last out the coldest of honeymoons. This with a tender leer.

And then he had put that matter aside, and had produced his little fat red memorandum-book and waggled it playfully at Joan.

"And now," he said, "I have got a little idea. Let us see what my little girl thinks of it. Will she come and sit on my knee and peep into my little red book and tell me what she thinks about it . . . ? Will she?" The knee was a very bony and uncomfortable one, as Joan already knew by experience, but she enthroned herself upon it with a docility which Mr. Torrington rewarded by some loving, if slightly clammy, dalliance. Then, returning to practicalities, he outlined his little idea.

It was really rather a large idea. Joan was to be introduced to his friends, acquaintances, relatives and other enemies—the *mot* was his own—officially, at a ball—a ball of silencing magnificence, to be given at Eastleaze on or about the thirtieth of December. Mrs. Lomax's aid was to be enlisted in all possible ways. The catering was to be done by Bunters—no confounded local bunglers for Mr. Torrington on an occasion of this sort. The music was to be provided by the Pink Slavonian Band—Joan to co-operate with Marjory Holthurst at once in the drawing-up of the programme. Joan was to wear white satin, and to command it without delay. Mr. Torrington would provide (1) a pearl necklace, (2) a fan of white ostrich feathers, (3) a bouquet. His hothouses would supply all other necessary floral decoration. He had planned out the cloak-rooms and the sitting-out places and the supper arrangements and the preparation of the floors.

In fine, he had thought out the affair to the colour of the programme-pencils and their silken cords. It remained for Joan only to approve what he had done, to fix the date definitely, and to make any additions or alterations of any other kind she liked in the invitation-list. He produced the draft list. It contained three hundred and sixty-two names, each numbered carefully. Joan, rather amazed, ran down its foolscap pages hurriedly, perceived that it was plentifully besprinkled with Sirs and their Ladies, and included the Holthursts and several of their friends, and passed it as approved *en bloc*.

"About your mother? Would she . . . ?"

"She won't go," replied Joan. "But I know she would like to get an invitation."

And, at the very head of the list, Mr. Torrington's stubby fingers scribbled, "Mrs. Velvin."

"Now, about the date? Is the thirtieth all right for my little girl? That will leave the invitations for three weeks ahead, clear. . . . I shall get them off to-morrow, unless the printers hang me up for the cards. When will you see about your frock? And when will you come and select the neck-lace?"

"As soon as I go back to Manton. The day after to-morrow."

"Good. I wish you could run up to London for the frock. Still, you don't know any one in London. . . . Your mother wouldn't go with you, would she?"

But Joan was of opinion that College Green could furnish a white satin garment of satisfying modishness and appropriateness. Mr. Torrington pinched her ear and put away his memorandum-book, and pinched her ear again, and was minded to further assaults, but suddenly recalled the fact that he had not yet been introduced to Mrs. Velvin. As that lady had not yet risen, however, his presentation to her was postponed until their return from the sending of his telegram in Westbridge.

§ vi

To Joan's annoyance, Samuel Purney and his son were standing at the front door with Mrs. Velvin when the car drew up at the garden-gate.

"Mother," she called as she alighted. And the huge woman waddled slowly down the path, wiping her face with her handkerchief as she came.

The interview was of the shortest. She shook hands with Mr. Torrington, scrutinising his face closely from behind an embarrassed smile. Mr. Torrington's smile, too, held a certain anxiety, but his manner as he produced a conventional delight at the meeting was smoothly urbane.

"I am sorry that I cannot stay this morning," he explained. "I must tear myself away from these sylvan haunts to the smoke and din of Bristol. But another morning I hope I may be able to see every corner of the home where my little Joan grew up."

Mrs. Velvin was much impressed by this little speech. "With pleasure," she smiled cordially. "I think we shall have rain before long. But that won't trouble you in your beautiful motor."

When he had gone, wagging his hand from the window, Joan walked with her mother up the path towards the waiting Purneys, bowed to them coldly, and passed on into the house. But Mrs. Velvin remained for nearly a quarter of an hour engaged in subdued conversation with them.

"What *do* those Purneys want coming here at this hour of the morning?" Joan demanded impatiently, when at length her mother rejoined her in the drawing-room. "I wish you wouldn't have them hanging about when James comes here."

"I shall have whoever I like here in my own house, Joan, whether James comes here or whether he doesn't. And I should be obliged to *you* if, while you are here, you'd take a *little more pains* to be civil to people who are my friends and

who have helped me when I needed it. They both thought it very odd and stuck-up of you not to stop to say even good morning to them just now. . . . They said so, too."

"I don't care a tuppenny ticket what they think or what they say," snapped Joan. "I don't like their coming here. I don't know why they come here." She looked her mother fixedly in the face. "Have you been borrowing money from them, mother?"

Mrs. Velvin, breathless from her last long speech, returned her daughter's stare with an unsuccessful attempt to efface that curious, childish timidity of hers.

"What an idea!" she gasped. "Borrow money from them! Well . . . you *must* have a pretty idea of me, now, Joan!"

"I don't understand why you have grown so fond of the Purneys all at once," persisted her daughter. "However . . . as you say . . . this is your own house."

"Thank you for remembering it," retorted Mrs. Velvin, with tart dignity, and waddled away from further dispute.

CHAPTER XIII

§ i

ALITTLE after four o'clock on the morning of the thirty-first of December Joan lay in bed, one cheek resting on a hand, her knees tucked up a little, her eyes chasing drowsily the flicker of the firelight from the fireplace to a polished leg on the wash-hand-stand, and from there, by the angle of a picture-frame, to the ceiling, where always the quarry escaped her, so that it was necessary to begin from the fireplace again. She was tremendously tired, tremendously sleepy. Her eyes ached with the craving for sleep. She yawned painfully and curled up her weary legs a little more snugly. For nearly half an hour she had lain so, with senses hovering on the verge of oblivion. But still they refused to slip over the edge, clung irritatingly to a brain that had no further use for them. She yawned again, and a tear trickled down between her cheek and her cupped hand.

The room in which she lay was that which she had occupied upon her first coming to Eastleaze. For she slept at Eastleaze that night, and, with the Lomaxes and Mrs. Formaby and the Torrington children, had slept there for several preceding nights. Cliffside had been temporarily abandoned. Two of Mrs. Lomax's maids had developed typhoid fever dramatically on the same day, and investigation had revealed the disquieting fact that the drains of the new house were in an extremely unsatisfactory condition. Mrs. Lomax had fled across the Downs with her children and her husband and her two guests to the hospitable sanitation of Eastleaze, James Torrington's dismay at Mrs. Formaby's coming being forgotten in his joy at Joan's.

"I can't get rid of her," Mrs. Lomax had declared with

pretty helplessness. "She asked if she might stay on with me for the dance. Besides, Joan has quite forgiven her now. You *have* forgiven her, Joan, haven't you?" And Joan had said with careless magnanimity:

"It is such a fag to have to remember that one hasn't forgiven people. Poor old Margaret——" (For, at her own request, Mrs. Formaby was now Margaret to Joan) "she means well. . . . She can't help a lot of herself."

And so Mrs. Formaby was sleeping at Eastleaze on that memorable night, as were the Holthursts and Cecil Torrington, who, but for those insurgent drains, were to have been the guests of Cliffside for the Eastleaze dance. Every bedroom in the house was, in fact, occupied, with the exception of the two rooms off the passage of Mr. Pericho's reputed wanderings. James Torrington had grimly defied any of his visitors to occupy either of those rooms. But though every one had been extremely humorous in regard to his challenge, it had remained unaccepted. Even the merry Mr. Lomax had been a little chilled by actual inspection of the haunt of what he described as an inconsiderate anachronism.

"A man ought to have some rational occupation," he declared, "alive or dead. To spend one's time loafing about, trying to scare elderly gentlemen in their own houses, seems to me a selfish, futile sort of thing to do. Besides . . . one doesn't quite know what to say when one meets a person of that kind. . . . Now . . . what would *you* say, Torrington . . . suppose he waits next time long enough for you to say it?"

Mr. Torrington had been slightly fretful beneath this persiflage. Mrs. Formaby—a convert to the Church of Rome—had momentarily restored the situation to becoming seriousness by declaring her resolve to besprinkle Mr. Pericho, if she should chance to encounter him, with holy water. But Cecil had finally driven his uncle from the conversation in surly protest by suggesting that this never-failing specific should be laid on to taps in every room of the house. *Joan*

had smiled at the pleasantry, and had been subsequently reproached for the smile.

"You may think my views about these matters quite wrong, dearest," her fiancé had said solemnly, "—even extravagantly wrong. But I expect you . . . not between you and me, but between us and everybody else . . . to support them loyally. That seems to you unreasonable, perhaps. But now . . . even in the small things as well as in the big . . . now, you and I must be one. . . ."

"Well," riposted Joan demurely, "then sometimes when I smile, you must smile, too. That is only fair."

Mr. Torrington had looked at her with coldly-glinting eyes.

"Keep your smiles for me, then," he said quietly.

"Fee-fo-fum!" said Joan. "What a wicked-looking ogre it can be when it likes. Never mind. My really nice smiles shall always be kept for you."

And her naughty glance had melted Mr. Torrington so that he had forgiven her and had quite recovered his good humour by the time that his guests had begun to arrive.

§ ii





The refrain repeated itself endlessly in the dim background of Joan's thoughts. At her special request the obsequiously-bowing little conductor of the Pink Slavonian Band had repeated the waltz—which Joan had heard that night for the first time—towards the end of the programme. She had danced it with Cecil Torrington. At one moment she had believed that she was about to faint in his arms. Again. And again. And again. The banal chords, imperfectly recalled, still elusive, seemed the blessed harmonies of a heaven where forever one floated dreamily, desirous only that the music should never cease.

Again. And again. And again . . . round and round . . .

The coals fell in and the fire quickened to a yellow spurt of flame. The light caught the polished surface of a little case containing menthol that stood on Joan's night-table. She had applied the menthol to neuralgically-aching temples and forehead before getting into bed, but perhaps insufficiently. Reaching out a languorous arm for the box, she touched her cigarette-case. And then it occurred to her to get out of bed and into a dressing-gown, and smoke a cigarette by the fire and cajole thus capricious sleep to her.

She switched on the amber-shaded light above her head, lighted her cigarette, and then very slowly got out of bed, and, having stirred the fire to comfortable briskness, turned towards the stand from which her dressing-gown hung. It seemed a long way off. A tiny spot on her chin, the one blemish on the triumph of the night, recurred to her memory.

She went to the dressing-table, switched on every available light and examined the spot with concentrated hostility. A spot was for her an almost unknown phenomenon. She demanded with vexation of Heaven why it had sent her one on that particular night. She wondered if *he* had noticed it. She glared at it again for some moments murderously, then anointed it with resinol, switched off the lights above the dressing-table, and drifted back to the fire.

Triumph. That was the word for the night . . . the only word.

It had all been like a chapter from a novel. She had looked—despite the spot—her very best, and she had known that she was looking her very best. The white satin frock—it lay there over the back of a chair close to her—had deserved the pains of its many anxious tryings-on and the bill which Mr. Torrington had insisted upon paying immediately upon the frock's delivery at Cliffside. Mrs. Lomax—who had been flattering sweetness from the moment of their re-meeting—and Mrs. Lomax's maid had assisted at the investiture of the wonderful garment, aided by Marjory's trenchant criticisms. By special grace, Mr. Torrington had been admitted at the last moment, and after a stare of almost startled rapture had looped about Joan's admirable neck a very magnificent pearl necklace.

And from that moment had followed six hours of intoxicating adulation. There had been many pretty girls amongst the guests, a few beautiful ones. But there had been from the beginning no doubt whatever in Mr. Torrington's mind—or, indeed, in Joan's, or any one else's—that the future mistress of Eastleaze was that night the fairest and most stately and most expensively turned-out woman within its walls. Compliments and congratulations had fallen upon her future proprietor like snowflakes, and to the last he had gathered them to his greedy soul with unconcealed exultation. The Bishop—that liberal, polished Churchman, who had come, *if not to disport his shapely calves in the dance, at least to*

display them with the most graceful benignity—had contributed a charming epigram.

“Where perfection ends Miss Velvin begins,” he had said, and had bestowed simultaneously upon Miss Velvin a smile of fine espièglerie—his smiles were famous amongst the ewes of his flock.

“Who said that?” Mr. Torrington had asked, with an eye to future anecdote. The Bishop had spread his white hands and raised his ascetic shoulders.

“But . . . every one,” he had said.

Mr. Torrington had conducted Joan personally, with solemn correctness, through the intricacies of the Lancers—having previously rehearsed carefully with her and with Marjory Holthurst this souvenir of his tepid youth. But otherwise he had displayed a most considerate self-sacrifice and had contented himself with watching from afar her progress through her programme in company of a succession of youthful and agile partners. If at moments their youthfulness and agility had shot his heart with pangs of jealousy, the faithfulness with which Joan had returned to him at the conclusion of almost every number had consoled him effectually.

He was no judge of dancing, but Mrs. Lomax, a fastidious critic, had assured him that Joan danced extremely well; and to his own eyes it had appeared that she danced divinely—gliding, as it seemed to him, above the surface of the floor rather than on it, and with a continuous, unbroken movement, as if by some much more smooth machinery than mere legs and feet. And, in fact, Joan danced rather well and as if she loved dancing.

To one of her partners in particular Mr. Torrington had paid serious attention—a Mr. Clements from Stretton, who, it seemed, was a more or less distinguished writer of plays (Mr. Torrington knew nothing of, and cared less for, the theatre subsequent to the Gilbert and Sullivan period)—and whose name had been added to the invitation-list in obedience to

a hurried afterthought of Joan's. She had given him a waltz and had sat out part of it with him—for the simple reason that Mr. Clements danced extremely badly. But this favour, even unexplained, appeared, upon consideration, perfectly harmless, Mr. Clements being adjudged by his host an entirely innocuous and ineffectual sort of individual—as was to be expected of a person who made his living by writing of any sort. When Joan had left him, he had apparently gone away; for Mr. Torrington failed to discover him again during the subsequent course of the evening.

One other selfishness Mr. Torrington had permitted himself. He had taken Joan in to supper. To Joan this had not appeared quite so reasonable an exercise of his rights over her as it had to him. For she had cared nothing for supper, but a great deal for the supper extras, all of which she had thus missed. She did not conceal from herself the truth that the especial sting of the loss lay in the fact that she had promised one of those extras to Cecil Torrington. However, in the most nonchalant way, he had substituted his own initials for the illegible ones of a subaltern from Horfield Barracks later in the programme. And after that the Pink Slavonians had interpolated the repetition of "The Druids' Prayer," and that, too, he had claimed masterfully—with such an ardent, tender, mysterious light in his eyes. (By express agreement, Marjory danced but once with him all the night, this being, in her opinion, a sufficient display of their engagedness for decent publicity.)

And after that. . . . After that they had sat out for a little while, in one of those two rooms destined to be converted into bathrooms. Those two remote, discreetly-prepared apartments had remained undiscovered by any one else, and there had been no interruption to those ten minutes of wonderful, perilous, blissfully-exciting intimacy. The distant violins had made soft sentimental accompaniment to their talk. The light had been a discreet roseate twilight.

Joan tossed the end of her cigarette amongst the glowing

coals and raised a hand to a pensive, reminiscent cheek. The arch of one little slippered foot that rested on the fender took the firelight pinkly, so that it seemed a continuation of the silken pinkness of her pyjamas.

What had they talked about . . . ? They had begun with the Pink Slavonians, passed to Mr. Clements amusingly, to the epigrammatic Bishop, to Mrs. Formaby's second supper, to an explosion that had disabled some of the Brewery's plant and several of its work people. . . . And then, without transition, he had leaned down to her, so that his face had all but touched hers, and had laid a hand gently on her hair, and had been about to kiss her. . . . She knew that he had been about to kiss her. She had seen it in his eyes. There had been a silence broken only by that distant pathetic accompaniment. Her own eyes had begun to close in the imminence of that unspeakable caress. All her being had swooned a little in the expectancy of it. . . .

Then he had laughed awkwardly, and had straightened himself and moved away from her, and commonsense had returned lamely to both of them.

"It would never do," he had said. "Never, never, little Joan."

Had she been glad or had she been sorry? Was she, now, glad or sorry? Another tear-bringing yawn interrupted this debate unromantically. She shivered a little, for her dressing-gown still hung from its hook. Twenty-three minutes to five. She began to move towards the bed stupidly.

As she took up the little case containing the menthol-cone she displaced slightly a little miscellaneous collection of objects that lay heaped up on her night-table—gloves, a handkerchief, her programme, a little cut-glass phial of rose-water, and some other such things. On a small salver which was discovered beneath them she perceived the corners of the envelopes of two letters which had presumably come in by the night post and had been left there for her finding. One was a trunk-maker's bill, the other a letter from her

mother. She tossed the bill on her counterpane and opened the second envelope sleepily. She read its contents through with compressed lips, and at the end uttered aloud an exasperated "Well!" and seated herself on the edge of the bed to re-read them with bent eyebrows and puckered lips.

"My darling Joan," wrote Mrs. Velvin. "You will be surprised I am sure by the news which I write in this letter. I felt that it was better not to say anything to you while you were here, as things were not quite settled then. But now everything is arranged. Mr. Purney and I are to be married early in the New Year. I am doing this for the best and I hope you will think it is for the best. I could not bear to let the place go on, as it has been going from bad to worse without any man to look after things properly and losing a great deal of money, owing to the men's carelessness and idleness. Samuel is a good, kind man and every one says he is one of the best farmers around here. We shall live, of course, here at Overbarrow, and Caleb will look after Pluckharrow, as he will probably be thinking of marrying now soon, and will make a very good husband for any girl, being so steady and kind.

"So that is my news, Joan, and I don't know how you will take it. It is a very serious step at my age, but I am trying to do the best I can, and Samuel knows quite well and understands that it is for the sake of your poor darling father's memory chiefly that I am doing it, though I respect Samuel in every way. Will you write to me and tell what you think and perhaps Mr. Torrington will bring you up in his beautiful motor-car to see Samuel and me now that it is all settled. To-night will be the night of your grand ball, and I know you will look lovely in white satin, and hope you will have a great success. It was very kind of Mr. Torrington to ask me, but I should have been out of place, an old woman like me, and would have been a great expense getting new clothes, which I cannot afford at present. Good-bye, my *darling Joan*. Write soon to your loving old mother."

"Well!" said Joan, a second time, aloud, utterly and completely flabbergasted.

§ iii

Now, while Joan had been thus engaged, some manœuvres of a sufficiently odd nature had been going forward in the next corridor.

In the respective rooms off that corridor there should have been sleeping at that moment the following persons: Mr. James Torrington, his nephew Cecil, Mrs. Formaby and the merry Mr. Lomax—exiled for that particular night from the society of a spouse already, perhaps, a little sated by his sprightliness. But at that moment the occupant of at least one of those four rooms was certainly very wide-awake. In the darkness Mrs. Formaby was sitting bolt upright in her bed, listening with straining ears and palpitating heart to certain most mysterious and disquieting sounds which had for a considerable time been audible in the corridor.

They were very strange sounds—sometimes swiftly-rushing footsteps that checked abruptly, sometimes ominous, heavy thuds, sometimes suppressed squeakings and gurglings, and once, almost certainly, a blood-curdling chuckle. Such was Mrs. Formaby's fright that she had been powerless to find the switch over her pillows. She continued to sit in the darkness, clutching the bed-clothes with perspiring hands, holding her breath for protracted periods in the effort to hear. At length, shuddering violently, she turned and groped again wildly for the switch, found it, and reaching out in the blissful light for a six-ounce medicine bottle which stood on the table beside her bed, extracted its cork feverishly, moistened the forefinger and thumb of her right hand copiously with its contents, and performed an elaborate sign of the cross. Fortified and a little calmed, she rose from bed, and, creeping on tiptoe to the door, sprinkled the air surrounding it in wide, hurried curves. Then, clutching the bottle to her *night-gown*, she stood close by the door to listen again and

iously. Not a sound was now audible. After some minutes—for she was a woman of considerable moral courage—she opened the door, and holding her guardian bottle in readiness against evil assault, peeped out.

Immediately facing her was the door of James Torrington's room, and, on the same side, some little way down the corridor, the door of that occupied by Mr. Lomax. Facing the latter door was the door of Cecil Torrington's room, for the moment out of Mrs. Formaby's vision. But, as she peeped out into the dark passage, she caught a glimpse of a strangely-clad figure disappearing into the light of Mr. Lomax's room, and heard Cecil Torrington's voice say in a laughing undertone, "Wash-out, old chap, I'm afraid," and Mr. Lomax's reply through a yawn, "'Fraid so, old fellow." Then the door of Mr. Lomax's room was closed, leaving the corridor in blackness.

Mrs. Formaby returned to the seclusion of her own apartment and restored her bottle to the table beside her bed. She was highly indignant, firstly because she had been rather badly frightened, secondly because she detested what she called the playing of pranks at any time, and thirdly because she considered the playing of them at nearly five o'clock in the morning, outside her bedroom, a most impertinent and annoying performance. She had no difficulty in guessing that the rushing feet and the thumps and the thuds had been designed to entice either herself or James Torrington into the corridor, to be met by the wearer of that strange-looking garment which had vanished into Mr. Lomax's room. The fact that she herself had yielded to the enticement without being met by it pointed fairly clearly to James Torrington as the proposed victim of his nephew's silly practical joking. Mrs. Formaby sniffed disdainfully, got back into bed and switched off her light.

For some little time silence followed. But presently she heard softly-moving footsteps pause just outside, and then a low, *dolorous* groan.

"Idiot!" snorted Mrs. Formaby, and clambered angrily out of bed again and, arrayed herself in her dressing-gown, resolved to make complaint to her niece forthwith.

Now, Mrs. Lomax's bedroom was that immediately adjoining Joan's. And as Mrs. Formaby turned the corner of the corridor on her angry way to it, she saw the tails of that odd-looking grey garment disappearing once more through a doorway . . . a doorway which led, as she was well aware, into Joan's bedroom. She heard a faint, choked little cry and the sound of some heavy article of furniture overturned, and an exclamation of consternation from Cecil. The door was shut, hurriedly yet softly.

"Upon my word!" said Mrs. Formaby. And, after a moment, with bristling propriety, "Upon *my* word!"

She sniffed. A curious, pungent odour reached her nostrils . . . a smell that reminded her of a blacksmith's forge. . . .

§ iv

Twenty minutes later Mrs. Lomax and Mrs. Formaby were sitting, as they had sat for the greater part of the intervening time, just inside the door of the former's bedroom, facing one another in vigilant and enigmatic intentness. Their faces were very grave. Noticeably they avoided looking at one another. Nor did they speak. There was, indeed, no slightest necessity for looks or speech between them just then. Each of them was perfectly aware that her own thoughts were precisely the thoughts of the other.

The door by which they sat stood slightly ajar, so that by no possibility could a person coming out of the adjoining room do so without his issue being detected by them. That faint pungency still lingered in the air, unexplained.

Once Mrs. Lomax had stolen on tiptoe into the corridor. She had returned with lips of glacial disgust.

"Laughing!" she had said, and had re-seated herself to wait.

Five minutes passed—six—seven. There was the faint grinding of a cautiously-turned door-handle, a momentary swiftly retreating rustling, and then, after a space, the handle's faint grind again.

Mrs. Lomax rose to her feet and drew her dressing-gown to her virtue venomously.

"You had better come with me, Aunt Margaret," she said. "I shan't keep you long. . . ."

And without more ado she hurried to Joan's door, flung it wide open and walked into the room, followed by her ally.

§ v

Oddly enough, at that very moment, Mr. James Torrington awoke—awoke with the conviction that for a considerable time previously he had slept extremely badly. It occurred to him that his windows were not perhaps sufficiently widely opened, he got out of bed to satisfy himself upon the point. One was altogether closed.

As he opened it his eyes surveyed for an instant the expanse of the northern sky and rested on Cassiopeia's W. His drowsy memory strayed to that blazing new star that Tycho Brahe had seen above the W as he walked home to his house in Augsburg, one winter's night in . . . what year was it . . . ? Fifteen hundred and something . . . fifteen hundred and seventy—something . . . seventy-eight . . . seventy-three . . . or . . . He retired to bed, shivering, and resumed almost at once his cow-like blarings.

CHAPTER XIV

§ i

THE night-porter of the Crown Hotel came forth into the cold greyness of the morning with a step-ladder, and proceeded to extinguish the three great lamps that had watched over its palatial portals during the night. His face was, even at that raw, unfriendly hour, a genial, fresh-coloured face in which a pair of shrewd, kindly eyes surveyed the rare passers-by with tolerant indifference.

A quickly-walking young woman, dressed in modest black and carrying a small attaché-case, glanced quickly up at his face as she went by, stopped, and came up the steps.

"I want a room," she said nervously. "Can I get a room here?"

"Will you ask at the office, miss, please," said the kindly night-porter. "First on the right off the hall."

"Thank you," said Joan, and hurried in by the great revolving door. The night-porter extinguished the last lamp quickly, descended from his ladder and followed her discreetly into the hall. A pretty young woman who arrived walking, and carrying her luggage, at seven o'clock in the morning appeared to him worthy of intelligent interest.

The pink-nosed and somewhat snappy occupant of the office inspected Joan through its window with visible suspicion.

"I am not sure if we have a room. I will see. Wait a moment, please."

She disappeared, to return with a very politely-business-like gentleman with a stare like a searchlight.

"You wish a room, madam?"

"Yes, please."

"For how long?"

"Until midday . . . or perhaps this afternoon. My luggage is at Eastleaze . . . Mr. James Torrington's house at Stoke Bishop. I should want it sent for later in the morning."

At that respected name the Crown Hotel became a place of bland smiles and eager service. Within three minutes Joan and her attaché-case were installed in one of its most expensive bedrooms. In ten minutes the genial night-porter had despatched to her by a brightly-beaming maid the hottest of tea and the slimmest of bread and butter.

"I should like a bath, please," said Joan, ". . . if it is not too early."

"Oh, it is never too early, madam," beamed the beamer, and hastened away to prepare it. On her way she encountered the night-porter, calmly precipitate.

"Gentleman to see Number Eleven, please, Maid. This card to be given to her at once. Waiting in lounge. Get a move on with it. It's old Jimmy Torrington himself."

As she read the spidery message on the back of the card, an immense relief eased Joan's breast. He had come . . . he had hastened to her . . . he could not have come to her more quickly. . . .

"Will you see me at once? J. T." was his message.

"Tell Mr. Torrington, please, that I shall be down in a moment," she said, and returned to the hasty gulping of her boiling tea.

She had made a hideously stupid mistake, . . . but all might yet be well. . . .

A hideously stupid mistake. She had realised that the moment the drive-gates of Eastleaze had closed behind her in the foggy darkness. She had left the house without seeing its master—had allowed her outraged anger to induce her to the extreme folly of what must, she had realised then, appear a shamed and dishonoured flight. But . . . he had followed her. . . . He worshipped her . . . he adored her . . . *she could twist him round her little finger. He would*

be angry . . . but he would forgive if she allowed him to kiss her and play with her hair. . . . Her appetite, which had baulked at the slim bread and butter until then, asserted itself suddenly, and she made a hasty sandwich of two slices and swallowed it in three mouthfuls.

Of the ignominious scene that had followed the irruption of Mrs. Lomax and Mrs. Formaby into her bedroom every detail, every word burned still in searing fire upon her tortured, fevered consciousness. It had become a nightmare, that brief interview—an orgy of insult and defilement the more mercilessly savage in its cold, triumphant self-restraint. They had found her in tears, lying across her bed in her pink pyjamas, with ruffled hair and flushed cheeks. She had raised to their entry a face of surprise startled to guiltiness.

“Get up and dress yourself decently,” Mrs. Lomax had commanded brutally. “No . . . don’t speak. I don’t want to hear anything from you. Dress yourself at once, and then wait for me here.”

“What do you mean?” had asked Joan, agasp. “Remember to whom you are speaking, please.”

The two invaders had agreed in a smile of lacerating contempt.

“You had better take my advice,” Mrs. Lomax had sneered. “It is far the easiest course for you. I recommend you for your own sake to leave the house quietly . . . at once . . . before the servants are about . . . before I have you put out of it by the servants.”

“Don’t posture in that immodest way,” had contributed Mrs. Formaby.

“And please spare us any ridiculous attempts at injured innocence,” continued Mrs. Lomax. “Your vileness is written in your face—you shameless wanton. . . . Thank God it has come to light in time.”

“Thank God, indeed!” had agreed Mrs. Formaby with *chaste fervour*.

And then, at length, Joan had risen from the bed and found speech. She had tried to remember that she was the equal of her accusers, that they spoke to her thus in a house that was practically her own. But the thought had no conviction. She strove for contemptuous, haughty, withering self-control. But her speech and the manner of it lacked sadly that sort of control, and, indeed, every other sort.

"You horrible pair of spying cats!" she stormed. "Leave my room this instant. This instant, I say. . . ."

But they had only smiled at her fury, and it had died within her beneath their eyes. For in a flash she had seen that no defiance, no humility, could save her from them. They had waited to take her. They had taken her, it must seem to any judgment, in the very act of sin. Her eyes faltered to the ground.

"Once more . . . if you take my advice, you will leave the house at once," said Mrs. Lomax. "You had better take nothing with you that is not actually your own. . . . You had better leave the presents that that poor generous man has given you. . . . I shall come back in half an hour and look over them. Put them all on that table."

And then the conquerors had left the field to their dishonoured foe and had returned to Mrs. Lomax's room to consider their next steps. Their debate was held behind a carefully-shut door. It was an extremely satisfactory one. But when they had sallied forth at the end of the half-hour in search of their prey, it had fled, and, indeed, by that time was hurrying across the misty Downs towards Blackboy Hill and the long descent into the city.

Mrs. Lomax had made for the nearest window and thrown it wide open. Then she exhaled a long breath. "Pouf!" she said.

"If she has really gone," had said Mrs. Formaby, "the sooner James knows, the better, don't you think, Edna?"

"We had better wait until he gets up. . . . He gets up at seven."

"And Marjory . . . ?"

"Marjory ought to know at once . . . certainly. It is only fair to her."

"I presume she will break off her engagement."

"If she has a spark of self-respect," said Mrs. Lomax with venomous determination, "she must."

One spark of common prudence had illuminated the blind folly of Joan's flight. Before creeping from her bedroom she had scribbled a message to James Torrington which she had dropped into the letter-box as she had let herself out of the house. It asked him to believe nothing until he had seen her, and informed him that she was going from East-leaze to the Crown Hotel in Bristol—the only one of which she knew the name—and would remain there until the middle of that day. This communication she had placed in an envelope marked "Urgent," and it had reached Mr. Torrington's hands within an hour of its writing.

He had sprung out of bed like a madman and, unwashed and unbrushed, had huddled into his clothes and rushed forth in search of Mrs. Lomax. He found her waiting for him in tearful agitation, with the faithful Mrs. Formaby in mournful sympathy by her side.

"Stop that confounded whimpering," he had snarled, "and tell me what is the meaning of this damned nonsense." He had waved Joan's note in the air frantically. "Why has she gone? Why has she gone, I say?" And he had shaken Mrs. Lomax's plumpness with feeble frenzy, until she had rebelled vigorously. From a safe distance, however, she had complied with his request with considerable alacrity. He had listened to her story in ashen silence, never once during its recital removing his fishy gaze from her face. Once only had he interrupted its vivid flow.

"In her pyjamas?" he had repeated. "You mean . . . nothing else?"

"Nothing," had replied Mrs. Lomax, averting her eyes modestly.

"Transparent, indecent things," had corroborated Mrs. Formaby. "More fit for a ballet-girl than a decent woman. . . . She was . . . I regret to have to use the word, James, but there is no other . . . she was practically naked when we found her . . . that is to say . . . when he left her. . . ."

When the story ended there had been a long and awkward silence. Suddenly the old man had turned upon the two women with the gesture with which he would have chased two hens from his sight.

"Go. . . . Get away. Go," he had commanded. And without further parley they had gone.

The chocolate chauffeur had been shaving his sardonic visage when he had received instructions for his immediate attendance with the Daimler at the front door. He had greeted the message with a carefully-selected blasphemy, but he had landed Mr. Torrington at the steps of the Crown Hotel in just thirteen minutes from its receipt . . . on a damp, chilly morning, too, starting from cold.

§ ii

When Joan entered the lounge, Mr. Torrington was standing by one of its tall windows, with his back towards it, and he stood so, waiting, while she crossed the floor to him with the window's light full on her face.

"Thank you for coming," she said nervously. "I knew you would come at once."

But he held up a dismaying spatulate-fingered hand, its palm chillingly towards her.

"Don't thank me," he said grimly. "I want to hear from you exactly what happened this morning. I have heard one version. Now I want yours."

"Whose version?" demanded Joan, with a suddenly-sinking heart. "Mrs. Lomax's?"

"Yes. Never mind about that now. I want to hear your version. First of all . . . was my nephew Cecil in your

room this morning for nearly half an hour, alone with you?"

"Yes," replied Joan, crimsoning.

"Were you in bed while he was there?"

"No."

"You were not. . . . Is it a fact . . . is it a fact that you were nearly naked while he was with you?"

"No," cried Joan. "No, no, no. That is a deliberate, horrible lie. How can you ask me such a question!"

"What clothes were you wearing while he was with you?"

"I won't answer. You have no right to ask me such a question. . . ."

Mr. Torrington took a step towards her.

"I have no right, haven't I?" he snarled. "No right? I ask you, were you not in your night-clothes . . . in your pyjamas?"

"I was. . . . But . . . oh . . . what on earth does that matter? What difference does that make?"

"That we shall see. And my nephew remained with you for nearly half an hour . . . while you were like that?"

"Yes . . . but . . ."

Mr. Torrington waved her "but" to perdition.

"Now . . . I have only one more question to ask you. . . . Not that it affects the matter much. . . . But as a matter of curiosity. . . . Was that his first visit to your bedroom . . . or has this been going on for some time? Have you had other interesting interviews with him of this sort? Dozens of them, I suppose."

"Never. Never. I swear it," wept poor Joan. "Oh, please believe me. Have you ever known me to tell you an untruth? Oh, how can you ask me such dreadful questions! It was only a joke. . . . He came in to try if I should be frightened . . . he had been trying to frighten you, but you were asleep. I fainted. . . ."

"Fainted? When he went into your room?"

"Yes. I fainted right away. And he tore one of the

feathers out of the fan you gave me, to burn, to try to bring me to. You can see the fan when you go back. Oh, please do believe me, James. Don't look at me that way. . . ."

But Mr. Torrington went on his avenging way inexorably.

"And then . . . when he had burnt the feather . . . you came to, eh?"

"Yes."

"In his arms, eh? He was holding you?"

"Yes . . . he had lifted me up off the floor. . . ."

"What happened then?"

"He wouldn't go away. I asked him to go away. I told him that it wasn't right that he should be there in my room. On my solemn honour I asked him ever so many times to go away. But he wouldn't go."

"No. He wouldn't go. He liked being with you while you were in those transparent pyjamas, did he? He liked holding you in his arms? And he wouldn't go. And then what happened . . . ?"

"Nothing, nothing, nothing," wailed poor Joan.

"Bah!" growled her inquisitor. "What is the use of lying to me? They heard you laughing. What made you laugh, eh? What made you laugh? Come; you were in his arms . . . didn't he press you to him and kiss you and . . ."

"Beg pardon, sir," said the cheerful night-porter, appearing in the arched doorway. "The maid wishes to know if the lady wants the bathroom now or later. Sorry to disturb you, miss. Bathrooms are very busy this hour of the morning, you see, miss."

"Not now," said Joan, averting her tear-stained face. "I shall let her know later on."

"Thank you, miss."

After the man's departure the situation hung in the air for some silent minutes. Mr. Torrington shambled up and down the room with a forbidding doggedness, plucking his wedge-shaped beard at moments spasmodically, bending his eyes *obstinately* to the carpet.

"Did you see that blackguard before you left this morning?" was his next question.

"Cecil?"

"Yes. . . . Cecil." Mr. Torrington protruded his moist underlip through his beard unpleasantly as he repeated the name. "Did you see your dear Cecil this morning before you came away?"

"No."

"Does he know you are here? Did you leave an urgent message for him, too?"

"No."

Mr. Torrington resumed his shambling.

"Come . . . tell me the truth. How long has this been going on? Long before you left Shalcott, I suppose? Pretty sport you two must have had there together . . . pretty sport. The blackguard . . . the cursed, scheming young blackguard! And then . . . then . . . to palm you off on me . . . his leavings. . . ."

He glared at her in livid rage for a moment, and then picked up his hat and jammed it on his big head.

"Well . . . you have taken your pleasure . . . and you have had your laugh, no doubt, many a time together, you and he, at a blind, infatuated old fool. But . . . there'll be tears in plenty for you, my true, loving Joan, along the road he has taken you. . . . And we shall see if he will go far along it in your company. However . . . that is his affair . . . and yours. All I have to ask of you is this. Unless you want to make me the laughing-stock of Bristol. . . . Perhaps you do. If you do, you can do it easily enough. But I have treated you well. . . . Come . . . haven't I treated you well?"

"You won't speak," he went on, after a pause. "Well, I say I *have* treated you well. I denied you nothing. And now I ask this of you in return. The only one that will speak of what happened in my house this morning will be you . . . if you do speak of it. That I am ready to make

myself responsible for. But I ask you not to speak of it . . . for your own sake as well as for mine. If you will do that . . . if you will keep silence about it . . . I am ready to do anything, in reason, to help you . . . if you want help . . . as you almost certainly will. That fellow will never marry you. . . . Don't believe it for a moment. For your own sake I recommend you neither to see him nor to have anything more to do with him . . . but, as I say, that is your affair and his. . . . You will not return to your mother's house now, I presume? What do you propose to do?"

"That is my own affair," sobbed Joan hysterically. "I don't want your help . . . any one's help. You are an evil-minded old brute. I always knew you were. And if my father were alive he would thrash you within an inch of your life. You insulting vile-minded old cad!"

Mr. Torrington took off his hat and considered her coldly.

"Well . . . I ask that of you," he said at length. "If you keep your mouth shut . . . and it is in your own interest to keep it shut . . . I shall always be ready and willing to help you . . . when you want help. You know where to find me . . . any time. Good-bye."

He jammed on his hat again and left her. The cheery night-porter—off duty now, but detained in the hall by a pleasurable interest in these matutinal performances of Bristol's Beer King, watched his departure with shrewdly-wrinkled eyes.

"Now what's 'e been up to with that little bit o' skirt?" he asked musingly of his successor and colleague.

The latter grinned. "Thinks of 'doptin' 'er, p'raps. Wait, though . . . didn't I see somewhere that old Jimmy Torrington was gettin' married? 'Course I did. Seen it in the "Times" and "Mirror," a while back. I remember." He winked towards the lounge. "That'll be 'er, p'raps."

"Glad I was nice an' obligin' about 'er tea," smiled the

night-porter, beginning to retreat towards breakfast and bed. "You gimme the tip when 'er luggage is comin' down, Albert."

§ iii

Somehow Joan faced the lift-boy, just come on duty with gleaming, flattened hair and still sleepy eyes. Somehow she found Number Eleven and locked herself into it and made her way to a chair. The chair commanded a view of a blind side of the wardrobe, an expanse of rose-trellised wall-paper, and a steel engraving of two stags and three mountains in a maple frame. For the next two hours her eyes confined themselves to this limited prospect, straying to and fro athwart it in never-ceasing quest.

They only moved. All the rest of her lay, rather than sat, limp and crumpled-up, incapable of effort, shrinking from the contact with realities that the slightest change of physical attitude must awaken her to. The maid knocked at the door presently to enquire about that postponed bath, but received no response. The hum of the dilatorily-busy old city swelled slowly up through the open windows. The cathedral clock close at hand chimed quarter after quarter in full-toned solemnity above a confused harmony of more distant bells and the clamour of the river,—struck eight,—struck nine; but of its warnings her ears took no heed. One sense alone remained to her, it seemed,—a sense that strove numbly to apprehend the disaster that had rushed out of the night to shatter the star of her triumph, in its brightest hour, in dust and ashes to the winds of the void.

It was incredible. It was impossible. It was monstrous in its cruelty, in its unprovoked wantonness, in the savage suddenness of its onslaught. A few hours before—those few hours that seemed an eternity of anguish—all the world had been hers to do with as she pleased. Everything she had wished for, hoped for, envied, and despaired of had lain in her hands. Her enemies had been humbled and powerless for harm; her friends had been every man to whom she had

cared to throw a smile, every woman from whom she had cared to accept one. And now . . . as if at the slap of some insane harlequin's wand . . . the softly-shaded lights, the music, the flowers, the incense of flattery, all had vanished . . . and she was out in a world of cold greyness and raucous voices and lath-and-plaster . . . here . . . hiding in this hotel room . . . her reputation ruined, her whole life perhaps ruined . . . afraid, ashamed . . . an outcast.

It was incredible, simply. Her mind could not lay hold of its meaning, its causes or its consequences. . . .

It was incredible that any one . . . even those two treacherous, watching women . . . could believe her . . . *her*, Joan . . . capable of that unspeakable, unthinkable baseness. It was incredible that she herself could believe that for a moment they honestly and sincerely believed her capable of it. And yet—for her overwhelmed heart did them this most reluctant justice—yet they did believe it. She had read in their faces the absolute conviction of it.

Oddly, their sureness hurt her ten thousand times more than that of James Torrington. There was jealousy to hurry *his* judgment to mistake, that innate, basic male distrust which the most innocent woman divines instinctively in the most subjugated man. But the undoubting, unhesitating condemnation of those two women made her soul writhe. Her fingers curled inwards convulsively at the thought of it, so that the nails dug into the flesh of her palms.

And Marjory . . . and Mrs. Holthurst . . . and the Colonel . . . and the boys. . . . 'A look that was almost terror grew in the eyes that climbed the rose-trellised wallpaper in that vain, never-ending quest.

It was monstrous . . . monstrous. That half-hour had held things that could never be confessed, secrets whose keeping must always be held dearer than life itself. But there had been nothing shameful. She had been tempted, but she had stood fast. Time after time she had entreated him to go away, entreated him with all honesty and clear purpose.

He had remained . . . but against her will. He had tempted her all but beyond withstanding, but she had withstood. She had fought the good fight . . . and this was her reward.

What would *he* do? Would he, too, come to her? It would be easy for him to find her. Would he come to her . . . and if he came . . . what?

He had sworn to her that he loved her . . . sworn it with burning eyes and eager lips and passionate hands. If he loved her, would he not . . . *must* he not . . . repair the mischief he had done her, in the only possible way? As an honourable gentleman,—and surely of such he was the most honourable and the gentlest,—would he not do that?

Wouldn't he?

But . . . would he?

And if he did . . . what of Marjory?

But would he? Would he even come to her? Was she sure that in the test her faith in him was any stronger than his uncle's . . . ?

It was nearly half-past nine when the maid returned once more for instructions as to her bath. Joan rose to her feet listlessly.

"Yes . . . very well. Now, please," she called deadily through the door, and began to unpin her hair.

CHAPTER XV

§ i

A DRIZZLING rain was falling as Joan emerged from Westbridge station that afternoon, and the ramparts of the Plain were vague blurs at the lower edge of a sky of ashen grey. She had consigned to the cloak-room her modest luggage—rescued from Eastleaze by the Crown Hotel 'bus—intending that a conveyance should come down from Overbarrow to bring it on there, and she started on her long uphill walk with the small attaché-case which contained the absolute necessities for the coming night.

The town-hall clock pointed to ten minutes past three as she crossed the wide market-square, and mechanically she glanced at her wrist-watch to compare Westbridge and Bristol times. An exclamation of annoyance escaped her. The watch—the most beautiful and valuable one which the infatuation of Mr. Torrington had been able to find for her in Bristol—had completely eluded the scrupulous restitution which she had made before leaving the hotel. She had packed all her gifts in a packing-case which the united efforts of the beaming maid, two porters, the boots, and the page-boy had procured for her. A third porter had appeared to nail it up, and had promised its instant delivery at Eastleaze by another trusty but obviously tippable colleague. The affair—including the packing-case itself—had cost, Joan estimated, something over thirty shillings; for to the last she had maintained the show of affluence which the Crown Hotel had plainly expected of her. But another expenditure upon the same account appeared now immediately necessary to her pride. She turned and walked quickly up the narrow street *towards the Post Office*, and collided briskly with Mr. Clem-

ents as he came forth from a tobacconist's, with a nakedly-brilliant packet of matches in one hand and a half-pound tin of his favourite smoking-mixture in the other.

"I beg your . . . Why . . . Miss Velvin . . ."

He transferred the matches to the tobacco hand and saluted with surprised gracefulness.

"We meet again," he said brilliantly, and smiled, and looked up and down the street, obviously in search of the big Daimler. "What a most delightful evening. Are you very tired to-day? What time did the festivities cease?"

"About three o'clock," replied Joan levelly. "You left early?"

"My leg . . ." deprecated Mr. Clements. "It isn't quite the leg it was. . . . Which way are you going?"

"To the Post Office . . . and then home."

Once more Mr. Clements looked for that splendid chocolate-chauffeured vehicle. Then he looked at Joan's face, looked away, and looked at it again very intently. Then he looked at her clothes. And then—for he was really quite an observant and intelligent person—he looked at nothing in particular with an excellent imitation of easy stupidity.

"Well . . . I must go in search of my noble Bucephalus," he said. "Unless . . . Can I give you a lift?"

"Thank you very much, no," said Joan. "I feel that I want a good walk to freshen me up. Besides, it is no distance, really. . . ."

But the observant Mr. Clements saw her short upper-lip tremble and saluted again with another blandly stupid smile, and left her. Before he reached his little green-and-white porch at Stretton he had converted that trembling lip into a fairly detailed three-act scenario.

When she had despatched the wrist-watch to Eastleaze in a registered packet Joan stood a little while indecisively in the doorway of the Post Office. He had not come to her. . . . But perhaps only because he had not been able to find her.

Probably he had left Eastleaze early that morning. She would at least give him the chance to behave honourably. . . .

She re-entered the office and sent off to "Torrington, Shalcott" the brief message:

"At Overbarrow."

"We read about your coming-out ball, miss," volunteered the girl who took the form from her. "The paper says it was the finest ball that was ever given in Bristol. You will find it quiet up there at Overbarrow after so much life and gaiety, won't you, miss?"

"I shall be glad of a little quietness and rest," said Joan calmly. "Thank you. Good afternoon."

But by seven o'clock that evening Mr. Popplewhite was able to learn from the Local Preacher that the young lady who was to marry Mr. James Torrington of Bristol, and who on the previous night had been "the most dazzling jewel in a galaxy of precious beauty"—this on the authority of the respected local journal—had walked home to her mother's farm up on the Plain, in the rain, carrying a little bag, and looking very pale and sad and as if she had been crying a great deal.

"'If riches increase,'" said the Local Preacher, "'set not your heart upon them.' They say she is a mere child, and he an old, grey man. How can such unions bring true happiness?" He winced and clapped his hand to the small of his back. "Ah . . . this damp . . . this damp . . . it finds me out."

"Have you tried Waller's Amber Oil for your lumbago?" enquired Mr. Popplewhite, abstracted despite his solicitude for his respected spiritual guide. And that night he drafted a letter to Miss Velvin with reference to a sovereign which he had stupidly overpaid her on a date in December. He went so far as to make a fair copy of the draft and to place it in an envelope addressed to her at Overbarrow. But upon further reflection he put the envelope away in his desk pending further enlightenment.

§ ii

The steep, deeply-rutted road which Joan climbed out of the town touched the margin of the Plain a mile or so to westward of the White Horse and, transforming itself from a road to a rough grass-grown track, led with tolerable directness across the Downs towards the little valley in which Overbarrow lay. Reaching the level of the uplands, Joan hurried forward sharply through the now gathering dusk, for all the ground about the old Danish Camp was now for her imagination haunted, the breaking-up in the previous year of a slope close by the path which she was now following having brought to light three gigantic skeletons, grim relics of that fierce, ancient fight that had decided—so Mr. Clements had explained to her—the fate of Christianity. About her as she went the plover swooped and screamed harshly, and every now and then a covey of partridges rose from beneath her very feet startlingly and whirred heavily away down the rain-sodden wind. By the time that she reached the little rise beyond the plantation darkness had completely fallen on the dreary billowy expanses about her, and it was with a sense of comfort and relief that she caught sight of the humble yellow lights of the farm through its surrounding beeches.

At her approach a snarling, nondescript terrier came from the darkness of the yard to meet her. But of the fiercest of dogs Joan had no fear whatever, and, finding the animal over-pertinacious in its hostility, sent it howling about its business with an adroitly-aimed lump of chalk. But this unfriendly greeting from a strange dog depressed her still a degree. The animal belonged, probably, to the Purneys, she reflected, and its presence indicated the likelihood of theirs. That would complicate an awkward situation most unpleasantly. She walked into the house resolved to give no explanation of her unexpected return to it until at least the following day.

“Joan!” gasped her mother, astounded, as she pushed

open the door of the room on the left of the passage. "Good gracious me!"

Mrs. Velvin laid down a blue foolscap document which she had been in the act of perusing, and rose to her feet hastily.

"What is the matter? You are sopping wet. . . . Why didn't you let me know? Have you had an accident. . . .?"

"No, Mother," replied Joan, quietly. "I haven't come in a motor-car this time. I walked from the station."

She surveyed the three men who sat around the lamp-lighted table and whose faces had turned to her entry in silent surprise. The Purneys, who sat side by side, remained in their seats stolidly. The third man, whom she recognised as a Mr. Benning, a Westbridge solicitor, half-rose to his feet and bade her a dubious good-afternoon.

"Can I have some hot water, Mother?" she asked, abandoning the audience with cool indifference. "I must change my things. I am wet through."

She turned, without waiting for her mother's reply, and left the room. Mrs. Velvin hastened to follow her.

"Hadn't we better just complete this little formality, Mrs. Velvin?" suggested Mr. Benning, recovering the blue document and flattening it out on the table beside a duplicate with one hand, while with the other he shook a quickly-produced fountain-pen. "Then I can get away. . . . It is rather late."

"Yes," said Samuel Purney. "We oughtn't to keep Mr. Benning any longer, Martie. What he has put in that is all right, you can rely on it." He nodded towards the two blue documents. "You'll be quite safe in signing. You may take his word for that, if mine isn't good enough."

"Oh, quite safe, quite safe, I assure you, Mrs. Velvin," said Mr. Benning, washing his hands cheerfully and encouragingly. "I have drawn up the terms of the settlement with the utmost care. . . . You may rely upon everything being in perfect order, my dear madam. . . ."

"Well . . . if you say so . . ." hesitated Mrs. Velvin,

and took the fountain-pen and affixed her two signatures with dignity. "There . . . I hope it will be for the best both for me and for you, Samuel, and for the farm. . . . Now, I must go and look after that hot water for Joan. . . ."

Already the copies of the settlement had been blotted and handed to Samuel Purney, who was signing them with a huge mottled fist, watched intently by his loudly-breathing son and the bird-like little solicitor. They paid no further attention to Mrs. Velvin, and she waddled out of the room hurriedly, full of maternal solicitude.

When the documents had been duly witnessed, and considered finally with judicious gravity by Mr. Benning, and placed in two long envelopes which he produced from his little black hand-bag, he handed one copy to Samuel Purney and laid the other on the table.

"Well . . . I think everything is quite satisfactory, quite in order, Mr. Purney . . . in every way."

"Oh, yes," said the farmer, putting his envelope away carefully in an interior breast-pocket. "I'm quite satisfied, thank ye. You'll be sending in your bill, likely, for this job?"

"Oh, any time . . . any time. . . . That is Mrs. Velvin's copy. . . . Any time, any time. No hurry, Mr. Purney. Glad to have been able to oblige you." At the door he permitted himself a smile. "I think perhaps it was a good move to obtain her signature just now. . . ."

"Ah," said Purney, slapping his pocket. "Ah. I think it was, mebbe."

"Good evening to you, gentlemen," said Mr. Benning, and went off with his little black hand-bag into the rain and the blackness of the night.

§ iii

A long silence followed his departure, broken only by Caleb Purney's slow, long breathing, or the hiss of the fire when his father spat into it.

"Well . . . that's all right, Father, isn't it?" enquired Caleb at length.

"Ah. Right enough . . . so far as it goes."

"Are you coming home . . . or staying for supper?"

"I'm staying for supper," said the elder man grimly. A pleasant leer raised the corners of his wide mouth and creased his cunning eyes.

"Why shouldn't I stay to supper in my own house, eh?"

"Not your'n yet, though," laughed his son.

"It's as good as mine, anyhow," returned the sire, slapping his breast-pocket again. "Sit down and smoke your pipe. I want to hear what brings that tow-headed baggage back here to-night, this way. . . . Listen."

He moved quickly to the door and stood by it, listening, one fist stuck half into the flap-pocket of his cords, the other shoulder drooped to the incline of his great head. From the landing at the head of the stairs Mrs. Velvin's voice descended in loud anger, and Joan's, a little more remote, but no less angry.

"Shame on you! Oh, shame on you!" cried Mrs. Velvin. "Oh, you poor, foolish, wicked creature! What is in your blood? *My* child . . . to come back here to tell me that. . . . Oh, how do you not hide your face from me? How can you bear to look at me?"

"Don't be a fool, Mother," said Joan, now on the landing, too.

"A fool. . . . A fool! You call me a fool!" screamed Mrs. Velvin. "My God! My God! What have I done to deserve this! My God. . . . My God!"

"Listen, Mother," urged Joan. "*Will* you listen? Don't work yourself up. . . . Oh, very well, then. . . ."

A door shut, and then another. The two men looked at one another.

"Something wrong, eh?" said Caleb.

"Ah!" said his father.

He walked across to rouse the fire with a boot-~~toe~~, and

spat upon it thoughtfully, and then, seating himself before it, filled his pipe slowly with shag, eyeing the blaze the while. Then he spat on it once more.

"Ah. It was just as well we got her to sign, my lad," he said, starting his pipe with half-a-dozen sucks like the poppings of champagne-corks. "I doubt there's trouble come home to this house this evening."

§ iv

Joan had divested herself of her saturated hat and rain-coat and skirt, and, seated in her petticoats close to the bed which her mother was preparing for her reception,—for she had expressed a desire to get into bed as quickly as possible—had already unlaced one shoe when, without preparation, without preliminary consideration of any sort, in direct defiance of all previous intentions, she had heard herself say, amazingly:

"Well, Mother, I have made an awful mess of it."

Her mother had turned to her, holding the pillow which she had been inserting in a clean pillow-slip baby-like to her massive bosom.

"Mess of what?" she had asked.

"Everything," Joan had said, with a weary little inclusive gesture of one hand.

"You've made a mess of everything? I wish you'd speak plainly."

"In the first place . . . I am not going to marry Mr. Torrington."

Mrs. Velvin's voice had fled in stupefied dismay into the remotest recess of her huge frame, and from there had squeaked faintly, "You're not?"

"No. I've . . . Oh, I've made a fearful old mess of it, Mother!"

And then, in a few bald, disjointed sentences, she had blurted out half her story, and to her horror had seen grow in her mother's eyes that same undoubting, unhesitating con-

demnation that had looked at her through those of Mrs. Lomax and Mrs. Formaby. She had mumbled the remainder of her account in inarticulate desperation, knowing that now her mother, in the horror and shame of its central fact and its central result, had no longer ears for comments or explanations or the feeble, futile detail of subsequent adventures. She had brought her narrative to a close by dropping her sodden shoe with a resentful clump to the floor and dissolving into the limp tearfulness of over-tensioned femininity.

But in the shock of this amazing downfall, this incredible, gratuitous casting away of the gifts of Fortune, this shamed and shaming return, there was no sympathy in Mrs. Velvin's agitated breast for vain weeping. Her retreat to her own bedroom—that honourable bedroom of the proud, blameless wives of generations of Velvins—had been a symbol, a blasting, irrevocable damnation. Her flesh-buried features were set in pitiless stone as she passed in over its threshold. She stood by the faded photograph of her husband taken in the days of his courtship—her dearest possession now—and looked down at it with frozen eyes.

"O God," she said aloud, "I thank Thee that he was not to know of this."

Through the partition-wall came the heavy clump of Joan's other shoe. The sound was the last straw.

"Going to bed!" cried Mrs. Velvin's outraged soul savagely. "Going to bed, is she? Never again in this house!"

She waddled out of the room hurriedly to Joan's door. It was locked. She rattled the handle furiously.

"Open this door!" she cried.

"What for?" demanded Joan's voice.

"You can't stay here. You can't stay in this house. Don't you attempt to get into that bed."

"Oh, don't be a fool, Mother!" replied her daughter again. And no other reply could Mrs. Velvin's bangings and hammerings and threats elicit. She abandoned them after some

little time, and flopped menacingly down the darkness of the narrow staircase to seek sterner assistance.

§ v

For the possessor of so naughty a conscience and a soul so bitterly disappointed and in every way grievously assailed Joan slept for the next two hours or so with the most unbecoming callousness. But on her first leaden oblivion there intruded presently an uncomfortable dream wherein she was flying in pink pyjamas through a night of torrential rain across the Downs somewhere in the neighbourhood of The White Horse, pursued by a great multitude of gigantic males who were at once Danish skeletons and more or less familiar moderns of a fleshiness distressingly indecent. There were enormous numbers of these unpleasant persons, and as they pursued her they shouted after her. "Hide your face. Hide your face. Hide your face." One of them was unmistakably a Great Western Railway Company's porter—a most respectable-looking man to whom she had presented a shilling that afternoon for looking very respectfully and courteously to the lodgment of her luggage in the cloak-room at Westbridge station. She ran and ran and ran, and the shouters came ever a little closer up with her, until she reached the path above the White Horse's head and, essaying to run down the sheer slope, tumbled head-over-heels out of her dream into a relieved awakening.

From the front-door, directly below the window of her bed-room, arose the sound of voices in angry altercation—voices which succeeded without a break those which had pursued her in her sleep. She recognised them instantly, and springing out of bed hastened to the window.

"No," Samuel Purney was saying. "No. You won't see her. Now. That is all I have to say. You can't see her, and you won't see her."

"But why not?" asked Cecil Torrington quietly. "I have

something most important to say to Miss Velvin. I shall not keep her longer than a few minutes."

"Neither a few minutes nor one," returned Purney. "Let that be enough for you."

"I'm afraid not," said the unwelcome visitor. "I must really ask you to let Miss Velvin know that I am here."

"Oh . . . must you, indeed! Well then, I must ask you to clear off out of this and not come disturbing respectable people in their own houses."

"I am coming down now, in a few moments, Mr. Torrington," called Joan from the window above the disputants. "Please wait there."

"Yes. Very well, thank you," said the young man.

He turned his back to the glowering farmer and stood smoking a cigarette nonchalantly in the still-persistent drizzle, until Joan descended the stairs hurriedly and, brushing aside the opposing hand which her mother, emerging from the dining-room, held out to bar her egress, joined him on the garden-path.

"Now, listen to what I say to you, my girl," said Samuel Purney. "I know all about you and this offhand young night-flyer of yours. I've heard the story you've come back here to your poor mother with. And I tell you that you've come back to this house and gone out of it now for the last time. You hear me? Into this house you'll never set foot again so long as she lives . . . or as I live . . . nor after that. So now go off with your Mr. Torrington. You've run to him . . . and you may run with him . . . and God keep you."

"Who is this gentleman?" asked Cecil of the furiously-trembling Joan, with elaborate suavity.

"Who am I? My name is Purney, if you want to know . . . Samuel Purney . . . as good a name as yours ever was . . . and a better one now. Now you know who I am. Is there anything else you would like to know before you go?"

"Nothing, thank you," replied the young man, easily.

"You don't really interest me, you see. And I wish you wouldn't shout so, like a good fellow. You'll forgive me for saying so, but you have a singularly disagreeable voice. . . ."

"Caleb," snarled Purney towards the dining-room. His son's huge bulk loomed up behind him in formidable silhouette against the light of the passage. "Put that fellow out of this," said his father briefly.

Now Cecil Torrington was deficient neither in pluck nor in muscle nor in quickness of eye, and before young Purney obtained an effective hold he received three lightning blows that damaged one eye and his nose severely. But to these hurts he paid no attention whatever, and after that the conflict was mere farce. He raised his struggling opponent waist-high, threw him halfway down the garden-path, followed him like a wicked big cat, picked him up and threw him through the garden-gate, picked him up once more and with a final heave flung him into the muddy little pond where the Overbarrow ducks and geese were accustomed to disport themselves. After that he waited impassively to watch Cecil's dripping figure emerge at the further side of the pond and limp away silently into the darkness towards the Lower Gate. His victory this tacitly acknowledged, he returned to the front door, where his father stood barring Joan's furious attempts at entry with his immovable bulk. Mrs. Velvin from behind them threw towards Joan the little attaché-case which she had brought back with her, and prepared to follow them with some garments.

"Gone, is he?" asked Samuel Purney.

"Ah," said his son.

"Go in and shut every door in the house."

The younger man obeyed in silence.

"Now, good luck to you," said Purney. "You're not wanted here, my girl. Go your way."

With an irresistible arm he thrust Joan back and, shutting the door in her face, locked and bolted it noisily.

"Her coat and hat," said Mrs. Velvin as he did so. "Let

her have her coat and sat." But the new master of Overbarrow paid no heed to its mistress and Joan's garments remained upon the inner side of the door.

For some moments she considered rapidly the chances of entry by one of the drawing-room windows. But even while she did so Samuel Purney entered the room with a candle and tried their catches with grim deliberation. Then, bethinking himself probably that Joan might endeavour to force an entry by violence, he closed the three pairs of shutters and barred them.

Joan raised a hand to her already saturated hair. She had hurried into a pair of bedroom slippers for her hasty descent, and through their soles the wet had already reached her stockings. For very ludicrous misery's sake she laughed aloud.

The Purneys' terrier, released apparently designedly from the kitchen, came snarling from the yard, but retreated abruptly, yelping.

"Joan," said a voice in most cautious undertone by the gate. "Joan, is that you?"

"Yes," she replied, and moved towards it. "They have shut me out. Jolly, isn't it, on a night like this? Did that big, cowardly brute hurt you?"

"A bit," said Cecil. "I think he has put one of my shoulders out. I can't move it much. I landed right on the point of it the first time. What will you do? You can't stay here in this rain. Where's the nearest house?"

"I shall go into Westbridge to a hotel for the night," said Joan with abrupt decision. "It isn't much further than Stretton. And, besides, I left my luggage at the station."

Cecil laughed admiringly.

"You take it pretty coolly, I must say. Well, if you're going into Westbridge I can give you a lift from the top of White Horse Hill. The car is over there."

"Oh," said Joan, a little cheered by these tidings.

"That infernal track was too bad in weather like this. *She would have stuck, for a certainty. So I left her with the*

man at the top of the hill. The sooner we get there the better, in my humble opinion."

The terrier returning furtively to the charge at this point, they bombarded it at hazard for a little while, then, passing out through the Lower Gate, set forth upon the slippery, rutted chalk track northwards. Out of a night of pitch-blackness the rain fell with soft doggedness. Only the faint pallor of the chalk, visible for a few yards ahead of them, held them to their path. And again for bitterness's sake Joan laughed aloud.

"I was out when your telegram arrived," said Cecil, possessing himself of her attaché-case as they squelched along, "but I came up as soon as I could. I say . . . I'm frightfully sorry about this mess-up, Joan. It seems rather an inadequate sort of thing to say to you under the circumstances . . . but I came up here to tell you that I will do anything that I possibly can to help you out. I shall never forgive myself."

"Does Marjory know?" asked Joan quickly.

"No. Marjory doesn't know. I don't want Marjory to know, ever. There is no reason why she ever should know."

"Oh, they will tell her," said Joan with wretched conviction.

"No, I don't think they will. You mean my stepmother and that old rip of an aunt of hers? No, I don't think they will say anything to Marjory about it now. Of course they wanted to, fearfully badly. They did their best to ront her out at six o'clock this morning to tell her all about it. But fortunately she refused to be disturbed until after ten o'clock. And by that time we had been able to talk them into common-sense."

"Who? You and your uncle?"

"Yes. Of course . . . well, as you know, they have nothing to gain by falling out with either of us. . . . They blithered a good deal in a high-falutin' way . . . but in the end they saw that my uncle meant business, and they know that

I always do . . . so they agreed to keep quiet. Of course, you know what women's promises are worth. But they may keep theirs. At all events for a bit . . . until the affair blows over."

The sheep in a fold somewhere in the darkness about them stirred to timid, spasmodic movement, their bells tinkling tinnily as they retreated from the sound to the remotest corner of their pen.

"I see," said Joan. "Until the affair blows over. You think it will blow over?"

"Oh, everything passes," said her companion with airy cynicism. "Of course Marjory will want to know why my uncle's marriage has been broken off. That's rather an awkward difficulty, I admit. In fact . . . it's an un-get-over-able difficulty . . . unless you do the noble thing. . . ."

"I see," said Joan again. "I am expected to do the noble thing. What is the noble thing, may I ask?"

"Just say nothing. . . . That is, if she writes to you, or tries to see you, as she probably will. We told her that you had to go up to Overbarrow early this morning about some business of your mother's. So that she will suppose that you are there. When she hears that the marriage has been broken off . . . she will probably insist on coming up here to see you about it. You know Marjory. . . ."

"Yes, I know Marjory," replied Joan, almost inaudibly. "But I shall not be at Overbarrow, you see. So that you will be able to tell her that it will be quite useless for her to go there."

"She will want to know where you have gone."

"Ah, well," laughed Joan hardly, "I think she will find it rather difficult to discover that."

They had reached the dew-pond by which the car had stopped on that gold-and-blue May afternoon. The note of the raindrops' beat upon its surface was a tone higher than that of their steady, swishing impact upon the grassy slopes that converged to it. In the plantation an owl hooted dole-

fully. Joan stopped and rested one hand upon the streaming wooden rail that fenced the pond.

"So this is what brought you up here to-night, is it? To ask me to say nothing to Marjory . . . or to put her off with some lie or other, if the worst came to the worst and she succeeded in seeing me. I am to keep quiet. I am to be the scapegoat. Well, it is pretty cool, I must say."

"Don't stand there," said the young man, a little irritably. "You'll catch your death of cold. Here, have this."

He began to unbutton his rainproof coat, but Joan refused it with a gesture and went on her way wearily. Her soaked skirts clung to her knees and made uphill walking on heavy ground a laborious business. Despite those two hours of sleep, an overpowering lassitude had invaded her body and her mind. Not even the cold selfishness of her companion's attitude, not even the fact that to him solely was due the crushing disaster that had overtaken her, had power to rouse her chilled, numb weariness to real anger. Her greatest desire was to be done with this forlorn journey through the darkness and the rain, to reach warmth and lights, to get into the humblest bed, to sleep, to forget.

"You know," he said, when they had advanced some way in silence, and she stopped again to rest, "the attitude Uncle James and Edna have taken up is absolutely preposterous. They have tried to make a full-sized scandal out of a perfectly harmless joke. . . . What have you told your own people?"

"Everything," said Joan simply. "And they have taken exactly the same view of it as your uncle and Mrs. Lomax have. It has been a dear joke for me, I'm afraid. . . . In fact, I don't think that I myself can see much point in it. I think you had better go on ahead to the car. I will follow as quickly as I can. I am walking in stockings. My slippers have melted. It hurts rather when one is not accustomed to it."

"Good Lord!" he said, dismayed, and began at once to take off his own boots, which he insisted upon Joan's wear

ing for the remainder of the journey. She attempted to smoke a cigarette, too, but the rain reduced it speedily to a drooping offence and she abandoned it. After another long, silent interval they rose from between two great enveloping folds of the Downs and caught sight of the lights of the car a bare half-mile ahead of them, to their right.

"You will want some money, won't you?" said the young man. "Have you got any?"

"Quite enough, thank you," she replied briefly.

They exchanged no further word until half-an-hour later the car drew up before the Red Lion in Westbridge.

"They know you here?" he asked, surveying her bedraggled figure dubiously when she had alighted.

"Quite well, thank you," she said again, briefly. "Your boots are in the back."

"I am frightfully sorry, really," he murmured, leaning out to her so that the man might not hear.

"I suppose it was just as much my fault as yours," she said.

To that he offered no contradiction. "I will come over to-morrow, and we can talk about things."

"I shall not be here to-morrow."

"No? Where, then?"

Joan laughed icily.

"I think I have given you quite good enough value for your thrashing," she said, and turning away from him walked into the hall of the little hotel. He stared for a moment or so at the gleaming imprints which her stockinged feet left behind them on the linoleum. Then, since the control of pedals without them was an uncomfortable procedure for a journey of any length, he demanded his boots of his sorely-puzzled chauffeur.

CHAPTER XVI

§ i

AT this critical juncture in her career, taking into consideration all the cumulative calamity of that unfortunate thirty-first of December, Joan might reasonably have been forgiven for at least that physical breaking-down which is the time-honoured right of over-harassed heroines. But it did not occur to her to have brain-fever,—for dramatic effect, unfortunately—nor a nerve-crisis, nor even rheumatism. The dull fact must be recorded that she did not even have a cold in her head. She simply slept for fourteen hours on end, and awoke about ten o'clock next morning, a little stiff and with somewhat sore-soled feet, but with a ravenous appetite, a rose-bud complexion, and a brain of the calmest and most orderly lucidity.

It would have been interesting, too, to have been able to narrate—that pathetic note having been allowed to die away delicately—her reasoned and deliberate grappling with an unkind Fate and her ultimate methodical and atoning progress along a carefully-chosen road to a triumphant curtain. But here again Joan disappointed all reasonable expectation. For when she opened her eyes a little after ten o'clock on the first of January in one of the bedrooms of The Red Lion at Westbridge, they fell, plainly by the merest chance, upon a large framed photograph which hung over the little fireplace, directly facing her eyes. It was a badly-executed, foolishly-expressed photograph, and it represented a person entirely unknown to her. But it decided her destiny there and then.

She rang the bell and asked that breakfast might be brought to her in bed, and while she waited for it she considered the photograph earnestly.

It represented a pleasant-featured young woman in nursing costume, simpering amiably over a coquettishly-tied bow, and obviously entirely satisfied with herself and, presumably, her vocation. The uniform was decidedly a most becoming one, Joan reflected,—especially to a girl with a clear, bright complexion, sunny hair, grey eyes, and a tolerable figure.

With her breakfast arrived the landlady of the house, a worthy, kind-souled creature, connected, as she had agreed with Mrs. Velvin on the occasion of the latter's stay at The Red Lion, by intricate ramifications with the Velvin family—as, indeed, was half the countryside. Joan's condition upon her arrival over-night had aroused her utmost solicitude, her guarded explanation of it as the result of a motoring accident, the utmost curiosity. She had accompanied the excellent breakfast which she had provided for her guest to satisfy both emotions. But Joan's gratitude for the first did not induce her to extravagant encouragement of the second.

"Who is that, Mrs. Dean?" she asked, nodding towards the photograph.

"That? That's my sister Jane's girl Lucy. She's nursing, now, up in London."

"At a hospital?"

"Yes. St. Martin's. She has been there for the last two years. Pretty she looks in her uniform, don't she? Were you warm enough during the night, my dear?"

"Quite, thanks, Mrs. Dean," said Joan, and returned to the interesting photograph. In five minutes, as she proceeded energetically with her breakfast, she had acquired fairly accurate information as to the steps which its original had been obliged to take to obtain admission as a probationer, the fees she had paid, and the nature of the duties. The information, if vague in places, was so generally satisfactory that she demanded her now-dried clothes immediately, supplementing them by some necessary purchases eagerly performed by her motherly hostess, and by eleven o'clock ~~was~~ *standing in the telephone cabinet at the Post Office.*

"Hulloa. . . . Is that Bristol 7778? Oh. I want to speak to Mr. Torrington, please . . . Mr. James Torrington. . . . What? . . . Yes. About business, please . . . important private business. . . . No. I must speak to Mr. Torrington himself. Just mention my name . . . Miss Velvin. . . ."

On the wall of the cabinet some inane hand had drawn a crude profile. With an abstracted forefinger Joan added to it the eye which it lacked.

"Yes?" said James Torrington's voice. "Torrington speaking. Is that Miss Velvin?"

"Yes. I want to see you at once, urgently. If I go into Bristol by the mid-day train, can I see you then at your office?"

"Where are you?"

"Westbridge Post Office. I am staying at The Red Lion here. I can't explain over the telephone . . . besides, it would be too long. But I want to see you most urgently."

There was a silence.

"I will go out to you at once," said Mr. Torrington. "The Red Lion, you say?"

"Yes."

"Very well. I shall get there a little before one, probably. Er . . . have you heard anything from my nephew?"

"I have heard a great deal from your nephew," replied Joan.

"Oh. Ah," said Mr. Torrington. "Very well. I shall start at once."

§ ii

When she returned to the hotel Joan found awaiting her a letter from Mr. Popplewhite, its original direction to Overbarrow altered to The Red Lion Hotel neatly. It informed her that the writer believed that on a date in December he had, while changing a ten-pound note for her, very stupidly overpaid her twenty shillings, and requested that, if she agreed in this belief, she would kindly let him have a remittance

for that amount at her convenience, to put his books in order.

There remained in her purse three sovereigns, a half-crown, and some coppers,—her total remaining defence. But she paid Mr. Popplewhite one of the sovereigns with such an air of careless affluence, and smiled at him with such tranquil radiance, as she did so, that for a little while after her departure from the bank he was inclined to deplore a perhaps undue precipitancy in the despatch of his letter. In the afternoon, however, he laid aside vain regrets with a prim little sigh, and bought himself an excellent pair of strong boots.

§ iii

Mr. James Torrington arrived very shortly after half-past twelve and was shown into the same sitting-room—specially devoted to Joan for the occasion by Mrs. Dean—which her mother and she had occupied during their stay at the little hotel two months before. There he found her awaiting him, unexpectedly self-possessed and business-like. She refused his hand with a cool little smile.

“You said you would like to help me if I wanted help,” she said. “I do want it . . . so that is why I have asked you to come. And I may as well say at once that I am prepared to pay for it.”

A curious light dawned in Mr. Torrington’s fishy eyes—that avid glistening which had warned Joan vainly on a memorable previous occasion. But Joan knew her Mr. Torrington better now.

“That is to say,” she explained quickly, “that, so far as I am concerned, no one—neither Marjory Holthurst nor any one else—will ever know why you have refused to marry me. I know that that will be a great relief . . . both to you and to your nephew Cecil.”

Mr. Torrington’s disappointment was visibly extreme. Plainly he had hoped other things. But he covered up his *chagrin* with a cold smile, and said simply :

"And in return . . . what do you want?"

"I want," said Joan succinctly, "a hundred pounds, and your name as a reference for the people at St. Martin's Hospital in London. I intend to enter as a nursing probationer there . . . and I understand that they will want a reference."

"You intend to take up nursing?"

"Yes."

"You . . . the work is very hard, very monotonous, very unpleasant. Have you considered . . ."

"I have considered everything, thank you," replied Joan. "I merely want to know whether you intend to keep your promise to help me, or not. I must have some money to go on with. . . . I have none of my own, and I know I shall get none from my mother. If you will lend me a hundred pounds, I will try to repay you when I can, if I ever can. It will cost you nothing to allow me to give your name as a reference. If you don't want to do this . . . you have only to say so."

Mr. Torrington stared at her for a long time.

"By God," he said, with a grim smile, "you're the business."

He seated himself at the little round table and took out his cheque-book. "Pen and ink," he said impatiently.

Joan found these and a blackened piece of blotting-paper, and laid them beside him cautiously.

"You got all your things safely, I hope?"

"Everything, thank you," he replied, "including the fan. I shall not debit you with the missing feather. Also the wrist-watch, which arrived safely this morning. I have put them all away carefully . . . as souvenirs of the one folly of my life."

He raised his eyes to her face. "You can have five hundred if you want it."

"One hundred will be ample, thank you," she said with finality.

He wrote the cheque and flicked it across the table to her,

and she folded it and put it away in her purse. He watched her, resting his big head between his hands.

"Tell me the truth," he said. "On your honour . . . had this happened before?"

"Never!" she blazed at him.

He rose and came round the table towards her, and she retreated from the menace of his sudden gorilla-like arms.

"Curse it," he said, "I won't let you go. I must have you. What do I care about them? Let them say what they like. Let them laugh. You and I can afford to laugh, too. Let us forget this blasted business altogether, Joan. . . . I will, if you will."

"Forget it?" repeated Joan scornfully, ever vigilant, ever retreating. "Are you asking me to marry you? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. Marry me, and be damned to the whole lot of them. We need not live in Bristol." He snapped his fingers. "Bristol! Bah!"

"If I had to choose between marrying you . . . now . . . and dying in a pig-sty," said Joan very distinctly, "I should prefer to die in a pig-sty."

She walked out of the room and left him, fish-eyed and hanging-lipped, tugging at his beard.

Afterwards she recalled that the day had been New Year's Day.

CHAPTER XVII

§ i

THE Flying-Man with two broken legs, in Bed Twelve, lighted the fourteenth cigarette which he had smoked since his arrival in D. Ward.

"Here she comes again," he said, with a cheerful grin for the benefit of his sociable neighbour, a Gunner Major with an arm and a half. "We're for it this time, Old Bean. Right to the heart."

At the first bed at the end of the long canvas-roofed ward Sister Velvin and her attendant orderly paused. When she had inspected the chart above the bed, she said, without looking at its occupant, "Now, please," and selecting a needle-pointed syringe from the boiling steriliser, charged it carefully with serum and turned to the patient, a haggard, fair-haired boy in his teens.

"What are you going to do to me now, Sister?" he asked.

"Anti-tetanic," she replied curtly. "Left arm, please."

"Oh, but I have had that beastly stuff before . . . six, seven, eight times. I must be simply seething with it."

"Left arm, please," said Sister Velvin impassively.

He held out his arm with resigned obedience. She imprisoned it with one hand in a grip of surprising firmness, and applying the needle to the skin drove it home relentlessly, withdrew it, dropped it into the steriliser, selected another syringe, and turned to consult the next chart, while the orderly dabbed the puncture with a little swab of cotton-wool.

"Some frightfulness," grinned the victim.

But the orderly offered no encouragement to his frivolity. Sister Velvin's ways with orderlies who displayed any show

of sympathy with officers' witticisms while on duty were known to him by hard experience.

She passed on her impervious way, firmly gentle, monosyllabic, sexless. The electric lights glinted on the tendrils that escaped, indeed, but in the most orderly flight, from beneath her cap. Her grey eyes glanced once with detached kindness at each patient and thereafter paid no heed to anything save his hurt.

"Hellofa pretty girl, Old Bean," murmured the Flying-Man discreetly. "Looks as if she knew it, though. Hull-oh! He's at it again." He yawned wearily and lighted the fifteenth cigarette. As he turned to place the burnt end of the fourteenth in the ash-tray on the locker beside his bed, two anti-aircraft batteries close to the hospital opened fire simultaneously. And through their uproar followed three heavy, jolting, familiar thuds.

"Coming in our back-yard, the brutes," said the Gunner Major.

The occupant of Bed Eleven uttered a curious, animal-like yelp and heaved a little beneath the bedclothes.

"Steady, Old Bean," said the Flying-Man, and then caught sight of an ominous stain that spread as he looked at it over the displayed sheets. "Sister," he called, quietly, and pointed.

She came with unhurrying haste, handing the syringe she had just used to the orderly as she came. As she drew down the bed-clothes of Bed Eleven, the lights in the ward went out, leaving only the faint glow of a muffled lamp by either door.

"Torch, please," she said, impassively.

"Torn them off 'isself, ain't 'e, Sister?" commented the orderly, as they bent over the moaning, lax figure in the bed. Sister Velvin gripped the end of a roll of bandage between her little pearly teeth.

"Don't talk. And please hold that torch properly."

The guns fell to silence, spasmodically, dubiously. The lights came on. She resumed her injections with the same

firm, kind absorption in her duty. When she reached the frivolous Flying-Man again he ventured on a pleantry of deceptive gravity.

"Very feverish, Sister. Do you think it's quite safe to give me an injection with a temperature?"

She laid her cool little hand for an instant to his forehead, and frowned.

"We are very busy," she said quietly. "Officers don't seem to understand that we really haven't time to be funny."

When she had reached the end of the ward she returned to re-consider Number Eleven. He was a black-visaged, middle-aged little man of incredible hairiness, hurt, as she knew, to the death, destined to hover from one interval of semi-consciousness to another for perhaps a few hours, perhaps an hour. Doubtless the guns had aroused him. For a little while she debated the advisability of tying up his hands, but perceiving that he had fallen into a sleepy stupor, she turned away from his bed and walked with her quick, flowing step out of the ward.

"All charts to be marked up anti-tetanic. And Number Eleven's sheets to be changed if he wakes," she enjoined upon a subordinate nurse whom she encountered upon her way out. "Keep an eye to him, please."

"Very well, Sister," said the nurse, meekly. "Your supper is ready now, please."

"Thank you."

She passed on into Ward E.,—a replica of Ward D., with its two lines of maimed humanity,—on into Ward F., a replica of Ward E. Half-way down she stopped to speak to an R.A.M.C. Major, a tall, slightly-stooping man of forty or so, with a clean-shaven high-boned face, very kindly, grave, grey eyes, and those faintly burred "R's" and lengthened "E's" that cling to the longest-exiled Scot.

"Number Eleven in Ward D., Major Grant . . . will you look at him, please. And that head case in Ward E., Number Three."

"Yes. Presently. I shall reach them in good time, Sister."

"Well, I thought you had better know. They are both very bad cases."

Major Grant straightened himself to his full six feet and planted his big, capable-looking hands on his slender hips, and smiled at her with the slow, grave Northern twinkle.

"Now, will you tell me, Sister Velvin, once and for all . . . Am I responsible for these three wards and their proper conduct, or are you? I think we had better get that just right once more, you know. It's nearly two hours ago since we decided the question last time. Are you responsible to me, or am I responsible to you?"

"I don't think that it is necessary to discuss the point," said Sister Velvin coolly. "I merely wish to direct your attention to two cases which I think you ought to see at once. Whether you do so or not is, of course, entirely for you to decide."

"Pish. Tush. Pooh. Bah. Hoity-Toity. And, last of all, Tut," said Major Grant. They separated, as in the last six months they had separated a hundred times, with the most ostentatious hostility. But as soon as Sister Velvin had disappeared through the door of the ward towards her tent and her supper, Major Grant moved with his gravely-twinkling eyes towards those two bad cases in Wards E. and D.

"Too many airs and graces about herself and her job," had been his original verdict upon her. But if his original verdict had concluded thus as to what it called her "jawb" unmistakably, his final one agreed that she knew it very thoroughly.

§ ii

In solitary state Sister Velvin consumed her supper, which consisted that night of Bovril, sardines, tea, and bread-and-

jam. As she ate she re-read a letter received from her mother that morning, which she propped against the tea-pot.

"My darling Joan," wrote Mrs. Velvin, "I got your letter this morning. Things seem to be very bad now and no one seems to know how it will all end. I know you are very busy, but try to write to me as often as you can as I am very anxious about you. There are a lot of soldiers billeted in Stretton now, and they sometimes come up this way. Very nice young fellows and I had four of them in yesterday to tea. They said my jam was fine. They seemed very cheerful and said we should win and that the war would soon be over now. With God's help it will. The new man Mr. Urcher recommended to me does his work very well and manages the men well and all the hay was saved before the rain. It is fine again to-day but every one is anxious about the harvest. The barley will be very late. I saw Mr. Purney on Sunday for the first time since the death of his son. He would not look at me and I think he will never forgive me for not marrying him, as he was very fond of me, I think, but treated you too cruelly and I can never get over that or forgive myself either, no matter what happened, Joan. But let bygones be bygones now. Take great care of yourself and come home safe to me soon, my darling child. Mrs. Garlick heard yesterday that her son Arthur has been killed. That is her brother and her first cousin and her two sons gone and her brother-in-law as good as dead a prisoner. She was in a terrible state about her son Arthur but it is a great pride for her she says. Young Henry Meade is a sergeant now. His mother had a letter from him from Mesopotamia last week. It seems funny to think of a letter coming to Overbarrow from such a celebrated place. He is a fine young man and I hope he will come back safely but it is a great risk. I keep fairly well, thank God, though I had to get some liniment from old Dr. Baxter for the pains in my side. He has got very feeble now and says he will retire and sell his practice soon. The fruit is very bad this year everywhere

but our plum-tree is bearing well. One of the men is taking this to post in Stretton now for me so I must close. Write soon to your poor old loving, Mother."

Joan's appetite was, as always, excellent, and she had reached her third slice of bread-and-jam when the batteries outside the town awoke again suddenly to noisy activity. She completed her meal calmly, lighted a cigarette and composed herself for five minutes of entire and blissful idleness. Her mother's letter had carried her back to Overbarrow. She thought of the plum-tree in the front garden . . . of sunny, childish days when she had clambered into its fork . . . of the front door and the cool, dark passage where the old clock ticked away solemnly. . . .

But it became quickly evident that the second invasion of the night was a much more serious and persistent one than the first. The note of the guns swelled to a continuous barking roar, punctuated incessantly by those dull, formidable thuds of which, of late, the town had become uncomfortably expectant after nightfall. So far, however, the marauders had confined their operations to the town proper, and the north-west suburb in which the hospital lay had escaped altogether their unpleasant attentions. There seemed no reason to anticipate any alteration in their procedure on the present occasion, though to-night the explosions sounded nearer at hand than usual and, to judge from their frequency, were the handiwork of a large number of planes. Sister Velvin hoisted her weary feet on to a second chair, closed her eyes, and continued her cigarette without anxiety.

Up there . . . what peace . . . what security . . . what quiet nights. She saw the immense safe skies, the vast, tranquil, rolling distances, the solitary, slow-moving shepherd and his flock . . . the white of the plover as they swooped. She smelt new-mown hay . . . saw the sunburnt driver lean forward to the lever of the rake. . . .

Two deafening crashes in quick succession, within the precincts of the hospital, as it appeared, aroused her sharply

from her brief repose. As she extinguished her two candles a dismal clamour of screams and groans in all notes of fear and pain rose to an appalling crescendo. A sharp, staccato sound pierced through the nearer din. Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop. . . . Machine-guns. . . . Whose? She jumped to her feet, found her torch in its prescribed place, and running to the door of Ward F., walked into it with deliberate calmness. Three more livid flashes . . . three more ear-splitting crashes . . . a pandemonium of shrieks and cries. Controlling herself by a determined effort of will, she walked calmly through Ward F., smiling at the faces that watched her passage.

"Tiresome, isn't it?" she said. "They didn't even give me time to finish my cigarette." Ward F. smiled, as well as it could.

She passed on into Ward E., smiled the same impatient smile, passed on into Ward D. In its entrance a bandaged figure collided violently with her, throwing her backwards into the passage between the two wards. She reeled, recovered her balance, held up a commanding hand.

"Go back," she said harshly.

"What is this?" asked a slow, level voice behind her. "What is this officer doing out of bed, Sister?"

A rafale of machine-gun bullets whizzed through the canvas roof, swept the central passage of the ward and one of the two rows of beds. Another followed . . . another. The air seemed alive for a moment with whispering death. The droning beat of the attacking planes swooped menacingly towards the roof.

Major Grant strode into the ward. "Those who can walk get to the shelters," he called into the darkness. "The others will be carried there. Don't rush. Take it quietly."

"Thanks awfully. Old Bean," replied a debonair voice. "Got an evening paper? It's so beastly dull not knowing what's . . ."

Zip-zip-zip-zip. A whistling storm swept the other side

of the ward. The debonair voice fell to ominous silence. A few cries followed, a few moans, the rustling of bed-clothes and unsteady movements of disabled men. Some one fell, and swore viciously. Sister Velvin's torch showed a huddled little column of figures retreating to the further door, half-a-dozen faces turned towards the light in stoical endurance, a dozen beds whose occupants lay dreadfully still. The beams of the searchlights wheeled blindingly to the ward for an instant, leaped away, leaving blind blackness.

"Take it quietly there," called Grant again. "They've gone somewhere else. There's plenty of room in the shelters. Don't rush." He bent over one of those still beds for a moment. "Gone to a better hole," he said simply. "Just come with me with that torch, will you, Sister."

A breathless orderly appeared at the door of the ward.

"Major Grant here, please?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"Colonel wants you, sir. He's in Ward F."

"Very well. Just carry on doing nothing, Sister, for a bit. Keep them as steady as you can. Oh . . . here . . . your friend Number Eleven has got his bandages loose again. Obstinate fellow. Fix him up, will you, if you can."

He stumbled over a figure that lay between Number Eleven's bed and that of the cheerful Flying-Man.

"Some one down, here. Torch, please."

Very peaceful, very unafraid, the nurse to whom Sister Velvin had commended Number Eleven lay with a dark mark in the middle of her forehead.

"Lord, what a stupid business," said Grant. "Poor thing. Slow . . . but very willing. You'll not forget to do those bandages. I'll send you Nurse Brookes if I see her."

He raised his voice once more.

"The show's over, gentlemen. I'm sorry about all those holes in the roof. But a little extra ventilation will do you no great harm on a hot night." He disappeared, without *undue precipitation*, towards Ward F. and his superior.

By touch rather than by sight, for the battery of her torch threatened imminent failure, Sister Velvin detached one sodden bandage and, fresh ones being for the moment unobtainable, decided to re-use it temporarily.

"Can you roll this for me?" she said, turning to the bed behind her. But the cheerful Flying-Man made no reply, for the simple reason that the fringe of that last rafale had riddled his bed, and his brave soul was now far out on its last flight. The bed beyond was empty, as was Number Ten, on the other side. Dropping the first bandage, she began to take up the slack of the second, unwinding it cautiously. And then the weight of a world fell upon her consciousness . . . crushed it down into bottomless annihilation. . . .

§ iii

She awoke, quite a long time after, in bed, in her own tent, and refused to be removed from it. The Colonel, a martinet, but a gallant one, yielded the point, and in her tent she remained until she was able to walk out of it to resume formally, for a conceded five minutes, her authority over Wards E. and F. That last bomb had abolished Ward D. temporarily.

But one afternoon, several days before that, Major Grant entered her tent while her face was being dressed. By orders suspected by her to be his, her mirror and every article in which anything approaching to a reflection was obtainable had been removed from her reach.

"All right, Nurse Brookes," he said. "I will carry on with this job."

But before he carried on with it, he produced from one pocket Sister Velvin's mirror and from the other his own shaving glass, and polished them both very carefully.

"Now, I want you, for once, to look at the gloomy side of things, Sister Velvin," he said, smiling, and held the two mirrors so that she could. Joan stared at what she saw.

"Shall I always be like that?" she said at length.

"That side of you will," he said. "Now look this way."

She obeyed, anxiously.

"Well, thank heaven I have still one decent side," she said.

"Ah, yes," replied the Major. "But that one won't last as well as the other. And I don't know that I like it as well as the other. It's a conceited-looking thing. Now . . . we'll cover them both up for the present, please."

Now this befell Joan in the July of the last year of that War that the earth even then believed great. And so, doubtless, it was ordained.

§ iv

On a mild, bronze-hazed morning in the October of the following year Mr. and Mrs. Cecil Torrington drove up to the entrance of the Bethesda School in Trowbridge, in a very new and magnificent car, in the back seats of which sat Mrs. Holthurst and the Old Gunner.

"How long will your Board last, my boy?" enquired Colonel Holthurst, as his son-in-law resigned the wheel to his daughter and got out.

"Heaven only knows," replied Cecil. "All depends on how soon I get into it and how soon I get out of it. Infernal nuisance, boarding one every three months. Well . . . *A bientôt*, Old Thing. Don't spend too much on those carpets. My miserable pension won't run to it, you know."

"Right-Oh. We'll give your old Board on hour. Suppose we roll up here at eleven for you? That all right?"

"I suppose so. Look out, Old Thing. This lump of old iron wants to ram our radiator."

There was barely room in the narrow old street for the weatherbeaten two-seater which had just appeared around the corner to pass, and Marjory slid into the curb again, to allow it to do so. Whereupon it stopped, cut off from the entrance to the School. The tall, clean-shaven man who had been

driving it resigned, too, his wheel to a feminine passenger, alighted, and passed in through the entrance.

"One of your Board, Sweet Child, I should say," said Marjory. "Rather decent-looking blighter. Good eyes. Now, what is his female going to do? Oh, she's carrying right on. Good."

The occupant of the two-seater appeared to have considerable difficulty with her clutch and her gears, for her face was down-bent to them behind the dash-board of the little vehicle, and remained so until she had drawn level with the Torringtons' car. Then, with an odd defiance, she raised it, and instantly three of the four pairs of eyes that had awaited its appearance curiously averted themselves in the polite blindness that overlooks physical disfigurement of the graver kind. Only Marjory's frowning gaze persisted. She sprang to her feet.

"Joan . . . Joan!" she called.

The driver of the two-seater turned, smiled slightly, looked ahead again, and passed out of sight.

"Dear me!" said the Old Gunner. "God bless my soul!"

"Let us follow her," said Marjory, eagerly. "I know it was Joan."

"I think you are mistaken, my dear," said her mother. "If that was really Joan, I am quite sure she would have stopped. It can't have been she."

"It was she," insisted Marjory. "I couldn't be mistaken. I should know her eyes anywhere."

"Oh, rot!" said Cecil. "You're always seeing Joan. Well . . . I must cut in. Eleven o'clock, then." He disappeared, waving a cheerful hand.

"God bless my soul!" said the Old Gunner again quietly to his wife, as the car moved away from the curb. "How the poor boys used to rave about her. . . . Do you remember?"

Mrs. Holthurst laid a gentle, warning hand upon his empty sleeve.

§ v

Towards one o'clock that afternoon Joan and her husband were driving home at the leisurely pace of their disreputable little two-seater along the road from Trowbridge to Stretton. In the fields the ploughs were busy and the crows wheeled raucously. Through the sun-bathed russets and yellows of the changing trees that bordered their way the ramparts of the Great Plain rose hazily to a sky of gold-flecked Autumn grey. Beneath the passage of their tyres the fallen leaves rustled crisply. In the mildness of the midday was already the tang of the coming night's frost.

"So that is your famous Cecil," said Grant, as they crawled up the steep ascent to Broad Compton. "Well, he's an M.C., and he has a rather interesting thickening of the right tibia. But, otherwise, I can't say that I was able to discover anything very remarkable about him."

"He has disimproved greatly," said Joan.

"Now, your friend Mr. Clements is a remarkable man, I admit. Not beautiful, but highly remarkable. Any man who can eat and drink as much as he does without having to call me in professionally must be a remarkable man. Of course, he writes plays and things, and works a good deal of it off that way. Still, he must have a remarkable digestive apparatus."

Joan laughed.

"Well. Now you've seen two of my ghosts," she said. "The third . . . well, I'm afraid you won't meet him in this world, poor old thing."

"Nor in the next," said her husband, with twinkling eyes. "There's a special place for good Scotchmen, you know, . . . and their good wives, Mrs. Joan. That is why some of them have to work out their share of the Almighty's displeasure by becoming miserably struggling country doctors . . . to please their wives and their mothers-in-law."

"Look at me, Ian," said Joan abruptly. "I want you to look at me well . . . now."

Her husband brought the little vehicle to an obedient standstill, from which, its brakes being of mediocre avail, it declined harmlessly backwards into the bank bordering the road several yards down the hill, and came to rest there decisively, with a stopped engine.

"He didn't recognise me, you know. He stared at me, hard . . . and he didn't recognise me. None of them recognised me except Marjory. Are you sure that you can still see the me you fell in love with?"

"I have a better answer than your question, little wife," said her husband. "I am sure that I fell in love with the You that I see now. That is to say . . . as sure as a Scotchman can be about anything that no one is likely to contradict him about. There's for you, my dearie."

"Very well," said Joan. "Then for goodness' sake get this wretched little perambulator going again and get us home before our rabbit is done to ballyrags."

THE END

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10



APR 29 1942

